flights

a novel

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

JIM SHEPARD

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

A thirteen-year-old hatches a plan of escape, solace, and utter independence through a dream of flight that's both literal and figurative in this engrossing novel by National Book Award finalist Jim Shepard.

As beset by the world as any thirteen-year-old — and maybe a little more so — Biddy Siebert does his best to negotiate both the intimacies and isolations of his world and his own maddening and slightly comical idiosyncrasies. His ferocious younger sister hates everyone, including him; his sprawling Italian family, when it comes to emotional matters, has the touch of a blacksmith; and his Catholic school education provides a ready framework against which he can measure himself as continually falling short of the ideal. As his grades slip and his family begins to come apart, Biddy searches for a focus and finds one during a trip in a family friend's private plane: To rise above his troubles, he's going to have to learn to fly.

Biddy resolves to steal the plane, having taught himself as a pilot through manuals and observation, and as he moves through the progressions of his plan, he slowly develops the confidence and independence he's going to need later in life. In this compassionate and honest portrait of the challenges, missteps, and small successes of adolescence, Biddy is an unforgettable character whose problems might seem common but whose solutions are often extraordinary.

- Jim Shepard
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    - DAD. Turning Two
    - Drawing the Walk
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Jim Shepard

Flights

For Shep, Ida, and Johnny;
and Joseph F.

Children are the eyes and hands of a family.

S. LEONG

I. *Labor Day*

DAD. *Turning Two*

A few things to clear up before we get started here: this great worry that everyone has that Biddy will go all to pieces at the drop of a hat does more harm than good. If we keep treating him like a head case we'll turn him into one. He is not one now. He keeps to himself. Big deal. He's quiet. He goes around the house with a long face sometimes. Does that mean we should lock up the sharp objects? He's a kid. Kids do weird things. If he wants to roll dice all night, let him roll dice all night. If he wants to stare out windows, let him stare out windows. Whatever makes him happy. Of course you work with the kid, keep an eye on him, try to keep him on a reasonably even keel. But how much more can you do? And after some of the things Kristi has done, we're going to sit around and worry about Biddy?

On one point his father was pretty well convinced, and not accepting arguments: for a bright kid, Biddy sometimes had the brains of a squirrel.

Two weeks earlier on a vacation in Beaufort, North Carolina, he had stood on a dock overlooking a narrow channel, struggling with a can of tuna fish. There was a thin strip of land called Carrot Island opposite him, and the sun was high and the air clear and the sky blue in the distance. Wavelets lapped at the wood pilings. His parents had decided to have lunch on the dock and his job had been to open the tuna fish. They sat with legs dangling over the water and arranged bread and lettuce and cans of soda on a small blanket. His sister was unwrapping the individually sliced cheese. Golden oil leaked from one of the initial punctures and the can was slippery. A menhaden boat passed by, huge and filthy, easing into the small channel like some sort of visual trick, with its cranes and nets in exotic disarray. The men aboard lounged and slumped motionless, not so much exhausted as dispirited, and the can gave a jerk and ratcheted its bladed open top along his index finger like an application of fire. The can flew from his hand and rattled on the pale wood at his feet, freeing tuna chunks and oil. He screamed, his parents turned, and the blood swelled into the cut the way the ocean swelled into depressions dug in the waterline at the beach. Blood ran down his arm into the crook of his elbow. He gripped his finger as though holding it together and felt dizzy. His parents were around him in a panic. He was laid down and his finger held high above him. The clouds beyond it were edged with liquid white where they faced the sun. His sister had crouched near the tuna, her hair fanning across her cheeks in the breeze, her finger delicately touching the blood rimming the edge of the can.

They'd wrapped his finger in gauze in the emergency room, and after a wait he'd been given a table. He lay back on it and they cleaned his arm and then the doctor arrived. The gauze had been pulled away, separating into stubborn strands dried to the wound that ran along the center of his middle joint and veered across his fingerprint to the nail. The cut was purple, maroon, and brown, a river on a map. They cleaned it. They gave him a shot, the pain jerking his head from the headrest. After a short wait the doctor returned with a tiny needle and began to sew him up. There was no longer any pain but he could feel the needle penetrate and emerge and he had to look away. He could feel the two halves of his skin being pulled together like the sides of a sneaker. His parents talked in low tones with the nurse. Another nurse appeared, looking on. She was blonde and pretty and heavy and wore a St. Christopher medal around her neck. He could make out the stooped man with the child on his shoulders on its face. She had a bag of potato chips upright against her chest and was eating them in small bunches, intent on his finger. They crackled loudly. A yellow piece of chip remained above her upper lip, like an unexplained blemish in a photograph. It surprised him, he remembered, his parents' voices low and dull behind the partition, that she could eat looking into his wound, and that the closing of his finger was so unremarkable to everyone present.

He had not been allowed to go swimming for the rest of the trip, wading carefully into the water with his finger aloft like a boy with a sudden thought in the baking heat. His father had remarked, paddling by, that only he, of everyone his father knew, could incapacitate himself on a can of tuna fish.

He dreamed of the Orioles. Take 'em down, Doug DeCinces told him when he returned to the dugout. He flopped against the wall. His father had mouthed the same words to him from the stands. He shifted on the bench, half a head shorter than the third baseman and fundamentally ashamed he hadn't broken up the double play. The night air was cool and the breeze lifted dust from the on-deck circle, easing it toward the outfield. Rich Dauer was on deck and Guidry on the mound, shaking off the sign with a quick, economical twitch. Biddy could see all of this, could feel it. A few moments earlier, he had slid wide of second base, ducking a throw from the Yankees' Willie Randolph that seemed about to decapitate him. He felt the dust on his hands. He'd gone into his slide too soon, had done nothing to upset Randolph's throw, and had never reached the bag. When he hadn't gotten up immediately, immobilized by the awfulness of his slide, the crowd had roared: it had become evident to even the least perceptive that they had just witnessed one of the worst slides in

Yankee Stadium history. He had looked into their faces, into the left-field stands, hearing the derision in their cheers, his toe still pointed at second base, white and implacable and more than a foot away.

You've got to challenge him on those, DeCinces said. Go after him and try and break up that throw. Do something to protect the runner behind you.

Rich Dauer was leaning over his bat in the on-deck circle, rubbing the wood. Beyond him Eddie Murray waited at the plate, bat cocked, legs spread. Guidry went into his stretch.

Biddy was a member of the Baltimore Orioles and yet not a member. He touched the piping on his pants and fingered his stirrup socks for reassurance. He scraped his spikes on the top step of the dugout, grateful for the chance, subdued by the color and grace of the uniforms and athletes around him. He was sitting alongside heroes and wearing colors that had been magic for him from an early age: black, white, and orange on a field of gray. He was down the bench from Jim Palmer and Ken Singleton. They joked nearby and shared a bag of sunflower seeds with him. He was part of an important game between the New York Yankees and the Baltimore Orioles in front of tens of thousands of people in Yankee Stadium. It was a successful act of will, just as a successful slide into second, a positive contribution to the team, would have to be. His father was watching. His teammates were expecting him to perform. Eddie Murray lined the ball over first base as he watched, as if providing instruction on the importance of will, and the Orioles were cheering now, encouraged, always optimists, seeing the game about to turn around. DeCinces laughed with them and slapped his oversized limp glove on Biddy's thigh, the big red "R" for Rawlings sticking with Biddy stubbornly as an afterimage.

He sat curled against his father in the den in the dark, the television providing the only light in the room. His mother was out late, visiting one of her sisters, and his father was unhappy about it. Biddy had just showered and was wrapped snugly in his robe, the terrycloth warm and damp. He had his feet tucked between the cushion and the armrest. His head was on a pillow propped against his father's shoulder. They were watching the eleven-thirty movie, and because it was a Saturday he hadn't been sent to bed.

They returned to an aerial shot of a desert, with the wreckage of a plane strewn across a gully of some sort. Some figures were moving around it. Jimmy Stewart stood in the sun, with George Kennedy nearby. They looked terrible. Stewart's cheeks were covered with a white stubble and his lips were cracked. Kennedy looked dazed and grim. They were arguing with Ernest Borgnine, who was sitting

against a torn piece of fuselage in the shade. The plane had had a twin boom tail assembly, and one of the booms with its accompanying engine seemed intact. Jimmy Stewart wanted to build an entirely new plane from that, with their help, and try to fly out of the desert. It was all up to a young German engineer with wire-rimmed glasses and filthy blond hair.

"Who's that?" Biddy asked. He could feel the men's suffering and imagined going so long without water.

"Hardy Kruger," his father said. "I'm trying to watch."

Hardy Kruger said Stewart's idea was possible, that anything was possible. Stewart, arguing for the attempt, said that Kruger had built planes before.

He built *model* airplanes before, Borgnine raged. He's a *model* airplane builder!

Hardy Kruger shrugged, his glasses dusty in close-up. The principles are the same, he said.

Stewart stood in the sun, wiping his hand on his lower lip, and began to speak so eloquently, as he paced and the sun beat down on the dust around them, that Biddy wanted to help, to search the cellar for tools.

It was impossible. All right, it was impossible. And they had a choice: try the impossible or stay in the desert. And I don't know about you, he said, but I've had enough of the desert. He explained: one choice was doing what you thought you couldn't, the other was giving up. George Kennedy swayed slightly in the heated air behind him. They couldn't do more than was possible, someone said. They'd have to change what was possible, Stewart said.

The group gazed at the wreckage. Biddy shivered under the terrycloth. Where would they get a tail, an undercarriage, the other wing? His father looked on, absorbed.

A commercial appeared and they shifted together, the spell half broken by the intrusion of giant hands and Spray 'n Wash.

"Look at this cast," his father said. The pages of the *TV Guide* flapped like layers of wings. "Attenborough, Kennedy, Borgnine. Peter Finch. What do we got now? Now it's sex or you gotta lop somebody's head off."

The movie returned. The crew strained against huge silver slabs of metal in the sunlight. Borgnine grunted and pulled, ropes around his shoulders. Stewart lifted and pushed, his sad eyes strained and desperate. Hardy Kruger rigged up a pulley system. They struggled on, overcoming problem after problem, spanning two commercial breaks.

The plane, finished, was christened "Phoenix" by the men. They circled it, unable to speak, and Biddy was moved by what they'd accomplished. "It's such a good story," his father murmured, and the

plane, with a surge and sweep of music, took off, bumping clumsily over the flat, hard sand and just clearing a dune ridge, its wings flexing and swaying dangerously. The men were whooping and cheering. Stewart was grinning. “They got it,” his father said, eyes on the plane as it lifted high over the barren slopes. “Just take off. You don’t like it, change it. Make it possible, like he said. I’ll be a son of a bitch if I wouldn’t’ve been better off listening to stuff like that.”

He recrossed his feet on the hassock. They could hear the crickets outside, musical and distant. “I feel sorry for you kids,” he said. “You don’t get stuff like this anymore. Now what do you get? Psychos with masks. People’s heads exploding. What do we expect? We show kids that and we expect them to grow up like Bobby Kennedy.”

The plane continued to rise, an oasis now in sight. Stewart hunched against the wind behind his tiny windshield, eyes slits, hair buffeted. They were going to land safely, an even greater accomplishment, and Biddy stayed on the sofa, wanting to share their release and achievement, watching the credits, and waiting for more long after the commercial break.

He played Wiffle ball the next morning in the backyard and called for them to hurry, as he waited in the outfield, the grass smell fresh in his nostrils. His back was to the bushes. The sun warmed his hair and his foot itched near the heel. His father whizzed in a drooping curve and his sister swung her bright yellow bat and the ball arced high above them, slowing fast, curling in the air as it spun, and he edged back and turned and lunged, the weightless ball slapping into his hand as he came down into the prickly support of the hedges.

While he lay sagging close to the ground, his father and sister laughing, the branches moved. The face of a kitten emerged, mottled in tan and gray, its green eyes alert. Somewhere a bird twittered. For a moment the kitten and Biddy and the space between them remained as silent and still as a photograph. He waited, wondering at a kitten at home in the middle of a bush, but it refused to stir. He waited, and his hand, as if approaching an extraterrestrial object, opened and moved cautiously through the hedges toward it. At the intrusion, the kitten slipped away with a single movement, sinuous, disappearing with an impossible hop into the shadowy tangle. The leaves of the bush shook and whispered in the breeze. His hand remained where the kitten had been, evidence of the ghost.

“Listen, whenever you’re ready,” his father called. “Or is this your way of saying you’d like to quit?”

He struggled forward, Wiffle ball still clutched in his other hand, and steadied himself before rising to toss the ball back in.

In a three-month-old essay on an assigned theme accepted on the twenty-third of May by Sister Mary of Mercy, sixth-grade teacher at Our Lady of Peace School, Biddy had written:

MY FAMILY

My family is not a big one. There is my father, my mother, and Kristi, my sister. My father works at United Technologies (Sikorsky) where they make helicopters. We have a dog, Lady, who is white and part Dalmatian and does some tricks. My father and I taught her the tricks when she was a puppy. My mother says our family is a big one, because of all our cousins and uncles. I have twenty-seven cousins. They are all Italian. But I don't think they count. I'm twelve and Kristi is seven. My father says he is forty-four and my mother says she is as old as the hills.

Sister Mary of Mercy had given the paper a B-minus and had added a note, scrawled across the top right corner: "Good, Biddy, but could you have said more?"

Creeping around the outside of the paper in the margins were dark double rows of box scores. Along the top an extra-inning game had been played between Balt. and N.Y., the extra innings spilling across comments and grade. New York had won, 13–9, with four runs in the top of the sixteenth.

Biddy was playing bent forward over the desk, the high-intensity lamp cutting a yellow arc from the gloom. He rested his cheek on his fist, rolling and scooping up dice with his right hand. Baltimore was ahead in this, the fifth game of the series, 7–3.

His hair drifted into the light over the supporting hand on his cheek. It had just been washed and seemed finer than his mother claimed it to be. It was brown under the high-intensity lamp's harsh attempt to lighten it, and where the strands separated — at many places, since his mother had been able to comb it out only once before he had bolted — it appeared so fine as to be indistinct. It was long for a boy with his neck, and his father occasionally told him across the supper table that he looked like the wrath of God.

His mother insisted his eyes were his dominant feature. They had been at his birth, she liked to continue, at which point he had looked like nothing so much as a little frog. The image did not flatter him. His father, mixing a whiskey and water, would glance up occasionally and say, "Good God. Look at the eyes, will you?" Or his sister, slamming a door or slapping the dog's nose, would hold up a hand, as if to block his vision, and protest he shouldn't look at her like that.

He focused on the green dice, translucent, glowing under the Tensor light and casting mint shadows on the white paper. The game he played he had learned from an eighth-grader the year before, after school, when he was cleaning blackboards and the eighth-grader was

being kept after. It had been explained systematically: six and six was a home run, six and five a sacrifice fly, six and four an out, and so on. He'd written it down and brought it all home.

It could be for him, he soon discovered, soothing, mesmerizing, and endless, spooling out into a perpetual string of games that absorbed time painlessly and unobtrusively. One quick game would become a doubleheader, a three-game series, five, seven, or an entire season, to be continued at another time. Box scores filled pages and pads, and appeared in odd places on scrap paper or essays from school. He'd play after dinner, after homework, right before bedtime. He'd play in the morning lying in the sand at the beach or in his backyard, his legs damp and warm on the cushion of grass. The games never seemed like an end in themselves, but a stopgap, a prelude. He had a very clear sense that he was biding his time, waiting for something to happen, and until something did he would be playing dice baseball. Refinements were developed, and outs divided into categories. Six and four and one and one, both simply outs in the eighth-grader's version, became long outs to center field and strikeouts, respectively. Six and three became a lined shot turned into a spectacular out by the infield. Five and five became a double play if any runners were on base. He began to keep track of individual performances and arrange his lineups accordingly. The games became more real, more visualized, but could not advance much farther, he knew. And his father, pausing motionless by the stairs to listen, could hear the rhythmic rattle of the dice sprawling across the pad of paper, day and night, he told his wife, day and night.

Lady lay on the floor near the bed, chin on her paws, listening to the dice with no apparent interest. White hairs were filagreed across the coverlet where she'd brushed against it. Kristi lay next to her, teasing her ears with a straw.

"Lisa's brother plays with dice, too," she said.

Biddy stopped rolling. "Don't do that to the dog," he said.

She rolled onto her back and looked up at him. Her hair swept away from her face and spread along the floor near the dog's, catching light. My beautiful blonde, her mother called her. She did not look like his sister. He wondered at times if some elaborate and complex deception had been at work. She was beautiful, he knew, sister or not. One front tooth was crooked, slightly overlapping the other. Thank God, his mother would say when it came up; imagine me with a perfect child?

She lay on her back with the straw in her nose and smiled. She was beautiful, and as mean as anyone he had ever known. The reason at times seemed clear, at times escaped him. She kicked a leg experimentally upward and held it aloft, sighting along it to the

ceiling. She said, “Lisa’s gonna get a cat.”

“Good for Lisa.”

“We oughta get a cat.”

“We don’t need a cat. We got Lady.”

She made a face. “Lady’s old.” He resumed rolling dice, and she clicked her tongue. “Lady’s no fun,” she said. She was listening to her parents downstairs.

“Leave the dog alone,” he said. “She’s not bothering you.” The game ended 10–3 Baltimore. Downstairs there was the splintering sound of a glass coming apart in the sink.

“They fight all the time,” his sister said. She looked at the dog sadly.

“Hey,” he said. “Lisa coming over for the Air Show?”

She didn’t know. She got up abruptly and went into her room. Lady’s ear twitched, the straw resting lightly on it like an aerialist’s balance pole.

He leaned over and cleared it away. “Why’s she do that to you?” he asked. He picked up the dice, the plastic sweaty and smooth in his hand. “Yeah, you got a case,” he heard his father say.

His knees flexed and his torso bobbed expectantly with the pitch, and Bucky Dent topped it, beating it into the ground, the ball bounding past Scott McGregor, who twisted out of his delivery but was unable to reach it. Everything happened at once as Biddy broke to cover second: Dave Winfield thundered in toward him from first, the noise dropping away like a dream as the Yankee Stadium crowd anticipated the double play. Dauer fielded it and flipped it to him and he caught the ball as Winfield went into his slide. He tried to get a good push off second, getting his knees up as he threw, but Winfield caught them as he swept by, upending him and crashing him onto his face and shoulder, arm still out from the throw.

DeCinces and Dauer stood over him while he sat in the dirt, his nose bleeding and snuffling, his lip stinging. Dent was standing on first and the crowd was whistling and stamping so that it seemed the upper deck might come down.

And that, DeCinces told him, is how you break up a double play.

He put the dice away, turned off the lamp, and walked across the hall to look in on his sister. She was reading a coloring book, her bare toes curling and uncurling. She looked up at him. “I was talking to you before,” she said.

He touched her leg apologetically. “I was thinking.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

He said he was sorry, and asked if she wanted anything. She

shook her head and picked at something on her back. He heard a voice and went into the hall and stood at the top of the stairs. His father was a gray shadow, barely visible in the dark at the bottom, telling them to get ready for bed.

Kristi was pulling off her top. He returned to his room and kicked off his sneakers. Directly below him his mother broke something in the den. He pulled off his tank top, shivering at the breeze through the window, turned off the light, and lay back, listening to the crickets.

"If it's such a goddamn effort, call him and tell him to stay home," his father said, and Biddy sank a little into the pillow. He decided to go swimming the next morning before Dom arrived.

They stood in a rough line in the hot sun, hair sticking to their foreheads. Biddy's Orioles hat was on backward to allow for the catcher's mask, and the sweat on his temples was sticky with dust. The dust invaded his mouth, sometimes chalky, sometimes gritty. He was vaguely reminded of Jimmy Stewart, so long without water, his eyes on the forming fuselage. They were working out with his father and Uncle Dom, and their grasp of fundamentals, according to Dom, was piss poor. Louis and Mickey, Dom's children, were having as much trouble as he was. Which was not encouraging: Mickey was not very bright and a year younger, and Louis was slightly retarded.

"Biddy, if you don't block the plate, they go around you. Do you understand?" Dom said. "You have to block the plate."

Biddy adjusted his chest protector, sullenly stepping nearer the plate.

"Here," Dom said with some exasperation, positioning him with his arms. "Here, right here. And spread your legs." He mimicked Biddy standing before the plate, erect, arms drooping, looking hypnotized. Mickey and Louis laughed. "You're standing here like you're in outer space. Some *mulignon*'ll go right by you if you're standing around like a lost soul."

"I don't want to catch anyway," Biddy said, somewhat in his own defense.

"I don't care. That's not the point. You said you wanted to learn how to play the game." Biddy scuffed the dirt on home plate. "Hey, it's up to you. You want to play for Lordship next year, it might be nice to handle more than one position."

Across the field the gulls were circling over the dump, Long Island Sound a blue line beyond.

"Want to try it again?"

Part of him did not. His father despaired of his ever excelling at this game, he knew: a lot of people had long since decided Biddy just did not have the instincts for baseball. He squinted, defiant, and

scratched his thigh with his glove and nodded. Louis trotted back to right field and Mickey to third. They were practicing the play at the plate on a sacrifice fly. Dom lifted the bat and ball and turned to face Louis, and Biddy adjusted the catcher's mask, the thick padding comforting against his cheeks. A bee swirled low across the infield, its drone distracting in the heat. His father stood on the mound, wiping sweat from his eyebrows with the back of his hand. The cool blue Sound beyond was soothing, and Biddy flexed back and forth in his catcher's crouch to relieve the stiffness. His knees ached. He wanted to salvage a tail boom and fly out of this dust bowl, letting his relaxed legs flap in the jetstream. His father lobbed the ball in and Dom swung under it, sending it off into the sun.

Out in right Louis took a step back, two forward, and pulled the ball in. As he did Mickey exploded from third, his breath whooshing down the line at Biddy, and Louis's throw came in high and hard and to the left, bouncing once, and Biddy lunged for it feeling it sock into his glove and tumbled into Mickey's slide, catching him on the chest and face with the tag before being jarred onto his shoulder in the dust.

He rose to all fours, one foot still tangled in Mickey's sprawl, sweat stinging his left eye, the ball tight in his glove and the dirt dry beneath his hand. Dom, standing over him, called the out as flamboyantly as any umpire ever had, and he rose from the plate happy to have made people happy, and tired and ready to go home.

They thumped into the house hot and dirty and wearing their gloves to find everyone sitting around the kitchen table as if they'd never left. Louis and Mickey trooped into the TV room.

"Had enough of a workout?" his mother asked. He shrugged.

"It's not the kids' workout, it's theirs," Ginnie said, nodding toward the men.

Biddy slipped onto the counter, his back against the cabinets. There was some leftover tortellini on the stove.

"Get off the counter," his mother said. "Sit at the table." Her arm glided past coffee cups, a dessert tray, and a bottle of anisette. She'd arranged the apricot cookies in a mound and sat beside them, her brown hair cut short and her tan pronounced. She was not completely enjoying herself, he could see, not completely allowing herself to relax. Dom and Ginnie they always seemed to have time for, she often told him, but his father never seemed ready to visit any of her sisters. Dom and Ginnie had no idea how much it bothered her, Biddy guessed, watching her as hostess. He'd told her once he never would have known, and she'd said simply, "You have people over, you don't treat them like that. I'm not a *cavone*." He watched her, wondering at her control, at the impenetrability of those around him.

Dom sat opposite her, eating black olives. He was Biddy's godfather, his father's closest friend. He worked in a sporting-goods store. He dressed like it, Biddy's father used to say. He ate a good deal and afterward made squeaking noises between his teeth with his tongue. Biddy remembered a picture he'd glimpsed of Dom's high-school football team: someone had written across the top "Roger Ludlowe Football 1952 8–0 Go Lions." In the corner he'd found Dom, number 77, his heavy black hair combed to the side, big gap in his front teeth. He'd had dirt on his nose and a comically tiny leather helmet perched uselessly on his head. Someone had circled the head and had written "Ginzo" in the margin.

"You have to sit up there?" his father said. "Get a folding chair from the porch."

He said it was okay.

"I wish he wouldn't sit on the counter," his mother said.

"What's wrong with sitting on the counter?" he asked.

"You like it? Fine. Sit on the counter. I don't care where you sit," his father said. "Sit on the refrigerator."

"Sit on the refrigerator, Biddy," Dom said.

"They just sit up there because they know it bothers you," Ginnie said. "Right, Biddy?"

Biddy shrugged at her. Turkey, he thought.

Dom was talking about his encephalogram. "This guy's putting the needles in, you know, like he's getting a commission. He's putting 'em in here, and he's putting 'em in here, and he's putting 'em in here, and all the while he's humming 'O beautiful for spacious skies'—you know, 'America, the Beautiful.' I'm sitting there with this guy sticking these things in humming 'America, the Beautiful.'"

There was general laughter, his mother laughing more quietly than the rest, and he caught her eyes and smiled.

"So I go, 'Look, Doc, whenever you're ready here, you know,' and he goes, 'What, are they bothering you, Mr. Liriano,' and I go, 'Shit no, you know, just point me north and maybe we can pick up Hartford.'"

Everyone laughed and Biddy clumped his heels on the cabinet doors beneath him for no reason, through the noise. Cindy was smiling up at him and he looked away quickly. This was an engagement party of a sort for her, and she was being teased again about the way she looked. *Milanese,* Dom speculated. *Fiorentino*. A big shot, from the north. But not *Napolitan.* Her hair was too blonde, her complexion too light. "My mother used to say, 'Whose *bambin* is this, eh? *Tedesc?*'"

She blushed. She wore light colors and delicate fabrics in summer, with two thin gold chains from her fiancé always around her neck, rich and subdued at the base of her throat.

“Too pretty for a Liriano,” Dom said. “Liriano women look like they play for the Bears. You — I’ll tell you what happened. Princess Grace came to me, she was retiring, she had a problem. You and Caroline didn’t get along in the bassinet.”

“You never told me your mother looked like she played for the Bears,” Ginnie said.

“She did play for the Bears,” Dom said. “Under the name Joe Fortunato. Look it up.”

Biddy continued to watch Cindy’s eyes moving swiftly from speaker to speaker.

“Look at the Head of Covert Operations over there,” his father said. Everyone looked at him. “The watcher. We’re going to call him the watcher.”

He smiled, embarrassed and unhappy, and Dom suggested he was getting psyched for the Air Show. Biddy’s mother asked not to be reminded.

“Don’t you think you can handle it, Jude?” Dom had three olives in one cheek and looked like a squirrel. “You only invited the immediate family. What’s that, six hundred thousand?”

“Every one of them ready to put away twice his own weight in pasta,” Biddy’s father said.

“Well, what do you think, those *chibonies* are interested in the Air Show? Uh-huh. Locusts. It’s like having locusts over. The only way your Uncle Tony’s gonna see the Air Show is if something crashes into the gnocchi.” He poured some beer. “Oh, they’re gonna see the Air Show, all right. They’ll be through the homemade stuff and into the Gallo before the Blue Whatevers take off.”

“Angels,” Biddy said.

“Yeah, Angels. They’ll be so snockered it might as well be.”

His parents fought after the Lirianos left. He’d heard it coming just in the sharpness with which they put things away, and he hesitated, stupidly, before coming upstairs from the cellar. Dom was fine, the kids were fine, all of his father’s friends were fine, his mother said. Everybody was fine except Judy and her family. Judy and her family got treated like shit. When he came upstairs, his mother was gone. His father sat looking at the coffee cups, food trays, and beer glasses.

Biddy came into the kitchen quietly and sat down at the other end of the table, stacked some coffee cups, and asked what happened.

“Your mother’s upset,” his father said. He picked up a slice of green pepper and tinged it off a wineglass.

“What’s she upset about?”

“She doesn’t need anything to be upset about.”

"Must be something," he said quietly.

His father shrugged. "Leave all this for tomorrow."

"I'll get it."

"No. Leave it." He looked over at the pot on the stove. "Want some coffee?"

Biddy shook his head. "Where'd she go?"

His father raised his shoulders, and drooped them again. "What difference does it make?"

"It makes a lot of difference," Biddy said. "Don't say that."

"Yeah, you're right." His father rattled an empty cup. "I don't know. Probably over her sister's."

"Now? It's so late."

"I don't *know*. Jesus Christ."

Biddy stood up and went into the den. Someone was shooting at an apartment building on the news and Kristi was still up. "What's wrong?" she said.

"I don't know." He put his hand under her armpit, lifting. "C'mon. Let's go to bed. I think she's over Aunt Sandy's."

"I wish I was over Aunt Sandy's," she said.

"No you don't," he said. "Come on."

Later, studying the color of his feet in the bright moonlight, he heard a noise in the living room, and then another, a clinking, and he got up and tiptoed down the stairs. His father was sitting in the dark. "What're you doing up?" he said. "Go to bed."

"What're you doing," Biddy said, not knowing what to say.

His father took his foot down from the sill of the picture window. "I wish I knew, guy," he said. "I wish I knew. Sittin' in the dark." They looked out the window together at the quiet street under the moon. A small animal crossed the street under the light.

"You don't have to worry," Biddy said.

"Nobody has to worry," his father said. "C'mon, champ. Bed."

A car turned down the street and continued past the house.

Biddy stopped halfway up the stairs. "Dad," he said. "You can go to bed."

"Don't worry about me," his father said, and some ice clinked in the dark.

He lay under the covering sheet, straining to hear, his eyes on the ceiling. His father's voice drifted up from below. He was talking to himself, his words muffled, faint. Biddy lay motionless for a short time, but the silence was filled with distant noise now that he concentrated, and he could make out nothing. He got up and crept into Kristi's room. He knelt by the bed, and she turned and made a noise, asleep. Her hair smelled of straw and the sun on a hot day.

“I love you, Kristi,” he whispered, and got out of her room before she woke up.

That morning he rose early, everything cold and quiet, the house making small sounds and Lady still asleep in the hall. He got into his bathing suit shivering a little and put on his old sneakers and a sweat shirt and went downstairs, yawning, trailing a towel on the rug. He opened the cellar door and eased the dog’s leash off the hook so it wouldn’t rattle. He let her outside, following with the towel draped around his neck. He let her urinate in selected spots and then stooped and put her on the leash. The foghorn sounded down by the beach.

It was four blocks away and she strained against the leash all the way there. When they got down the bluffs onto the sand he released her to run back and forth from driftwood to shore, from kelp to old shoe.

He squatted by the water, keeping an eye on her, his fingers poking around for smooth, skippable stones. He was already too late: the sun was above the horizon and the fog was burning off as things warmed up. It wasn’t as he’d pictured it the night before, when he’d conceived of being at the edge of the Sound in the extreme early morning; he’d imagined it as long and low and empty, everything gray and smooth, the two of them away from the land, on a sandbar, perhaps, connected to the beach by a narrow spit that disappeared as the tide came in. The possibility of being away from the land, released, lost in the fog, attracted him. Or on the beach itself, gently sloping into the chilled water and damp with sand that had the granular clumpiness of brown sugar. The fog would have misted in from the sea, obscuring everything but the closest birds, standing dully along the waterline.

He’d imagined a sanctuary and had tried to find its equivalent in Lordship. He’d imagined dozing and waking to the foghorn and not knowing where he was; he’d imagined a rose color mixing with the gray in the east as the sun began to assert itself. He’d imagined the foghorn coming back like God the Father to reorient him in the silence.

The wind coursed along the sand behind him, very low, dipping smoothly through depressions and lifting and twirling the cockleburs and sea grass. This was a nice beach, and in places a beautiful beach, but not the one he’d imagined.

A gull came in, skimming, and swooped away. Lady followed it with her eyes.

“This beach isn’t right either,” he said. She watched the gull, wheeling in the distance. He stared out to sea. “Sometimes I don’t think I can do anything right,” he said finally.

Dent topped it again, and again McGregor missed it, falling, perhaps, or leaning the wrong way, and DeCinces yelled Turn two! and with a man on third and one out Biddy knew he had to prevent the run from scoring and he broke to cover second and took Dauer's flip, and bobbled it, his fingers frantically pulling it in and controlling it in time to have Winfield catch him low sliding in hard, but he couldn't accept that, and through sheer force of will his mind's eye got it right, his hand caught it firmly, and he spun and threw, pulling his legs up, but his throw was wild, too much across his body, skipping once in the dirt and into the dugout, and he said No no no and did it again, taking the flip, releasing the ball, his eyes watching its flight, too low, and again, too wide, and again.

Lady came back, circling; he'd scared her. He reached out a hand and she lowered her head to it. He pulled her in and stuck his face in her muzzle, feeling her whiskers.

"I can't even imagine it right," he said. "Oh God, Lady, I can't even imagine it right."

When he got back his mother was home, crawling around the garden and ripping at weeds with a little three-pronged weeder. Dom was there for the second day in a row, sitting with Biddy's father, Mickey, and Louis on the steps to the back porch. He let Lady go as he came up the driveway. His father said, "Here he is. The early bird."

"Grab your glove, pal," Dom said. "We're going to the field."

Upstairs he put on his better sneakers and found his glove, and when he came down they were all gone, waiting for him in the car out front. He crossed the backyard to the garden.

His mother dug a neat row, creeping forward on her knees.

"Hey, Mom," he said.

"Good morning. You were up early."

He nodded but she didn't see him.

"Something to do?"

"Uh-huh." The car honked in the front and he put his glove on. "Cindy or Ginnie didn't come?"

"No." She caught part of a tomato plant with the weeder. "Where you going now? You have breakfast?"

"I'll get something when I get back." He stepped toward the driveway. "You want me to stay around?"

She looked up, surprised, and shook her head. He popped his fist into his glove and jogged around front.

They got into a game with others at the field and played late into the afternoon. He played badly. While someone was retrieving a foul ball that had gone into the street, Dom left his position and walked over to him at second base.

“You won’t play second next year if you can’t turn two,” he said. He kept his voice down. Biddy moved away, wishing he hadn’t come home from the beach. His father watched them from the pitcher’s mound. Biddy wanted to play better. He wanted to handle himself competently, even if only momentarily. His father was frequently of the opinion that he couldn’t piss straight without a ruler.

Dom followed him in a circle around second base. “Look, I’m not trying to make you feel bad. You told me you wanted to learn this game.”

Biddy nodded.

“Well, you’re going to have to start listening. You let that last one play you instead of playing it. Now don’t rush yourself. Are you listening?” Biddy nodded again. “Get to the bag and concentrate on the throw. And get your legs up if the runner’s coming in high.”

He returned to third. “Now Mickey’s on first, so be ready for it if it’s on the ground.”

And the next batter hit one on the ground to third as if on cue, and Dom said, “All right, Biddy,” and crouched for it, and Biddy came across and took the throw on the bag and started to pivot for the relay to first but Mickey hadn’t gone into his slide yet and only at the last moment was he able to get the throw up higher, to clear Mickey’s head. It pulled Louis, playing first, high off the bag.

He stood where the throw had left him, hating the ball. His father and Dom were looking at him, he knew. No one spoke. What was he doing this for? Why was he always somewhere he didn’t want to be?

“I didn’t want to hit Mickey,” he said.

“Don’t worry about Mickey,” Dom said. “Worry about your throw. They’ll do that all day if you let them. Throw it where you’re supposed to throw it. Throw right through the runner. Believe me, he’ll get out of the way.”

His father said something about bearing down. A boy he didn’t know stood on first. He looked at the batter. Hit it to me, he thought miserably. Hit it to me and I’ll throw it into the street. The batter dribbled it back to his father, who twirled and threw it to second, the ball and Biddy converging on the base from different angles, and he stomped on the bag and spun, whipping his arm around and rifling the ball low, and the boy coming into second jerked back and sprawled hard into the dirt as the ball went by his face on a line into Louis’s glove.

“There’s the double play,” his father called, and Dom said, “That’s turning two,” and they slapped each other five and trotted off the field together, Biddy following, stopping to help the boy still on his elbows in the base path up as he went by.

He returned to the beach, unsure of his reason why. It was a Saturday afternoon and blankets spotted the slope to the water but an advancing wall of clouds, high up and reaching infinitely higher, black and gray and darkening the expanse of sound beneath, was approaching from the west, from Bridgeport or New York.

To the east and above them the sky remained clear, the sun warm, as if collaborating in the deception. One or two sailboats rested nose forward on the beach, their masts stripped and topped by multicolored floats, their sails heaped onto the hulls like covering sheets. Other boats cruised smoothly into shore, gently racing the oncoming storm. As they pulled onto the beach, dagger boards were slid up and the hulls made pleasant grinding noises on the sand.

He sat watching the boats, towel still rolled beneath his arm. The metal fittings on the lines clanged against the hollow, swaying masts, and trailers, squeaky and toylike, were rolled to the water's edge.

The wind was sweeping around him, audible in the sea grass and sand. People rose from the blankets with the wariness of birds, gauging the speed of the incoming storm. Bridgeport was dark and vague with a distant scrim of rain.

Boats rolled by him toward the boat ramp, disassembled masts clanking on the tops of the hulls and wheels rolling heavily through the deeper sand. Bathers, too, were joining the exodus, with lawn chairs and blankets, coolers and small children, falling into line alongside or behind the boats, all streaming past Biddy like tanned and sandy refugees.

His eye caught one boat, still quite a way out, its red-and-white sail sweeping and flapping as it came about. He knew simply from its inept turn, the sail going limp, the motion jagged and wasteful, that it would not beat the oncoming storm. The darkness was rolling in like a curtain and birds swooped and dove past him, fleeing before the gathering violence.

It was noticeably cooler. He shivered, and dug a deep hole, leaning forward on his knees and scooping sand with both hands. A last bather went by. "I don't think you're gonna finish that, son," he said. "That's a helluva storm coming." Biddy smiled an acknowledgment and the man trundled off, newspaper flapping against a folded sand chair. With the hole a foot deep he dropped his towel into it and covered it over. He found two large stones, and marked the place.

He was alone on the beach. Bridgeport was gone. A lone gull skimmed by, a shadow along the waterline. His hair lifted from his head. His skin prickled, the tiny hairs on his arm waving.

He was moving the tips of his fingers along the hairs, absorbed, when the storm hit. The rain came down the beach and along the

water toward him in an audible track, the shimmering sound on the water and sea grass gaining in intensity until it swept over him and he was shocked by its iciness and power, drenched in seconds. In the half darkness he could see the boat, buffeted, sweeping high over crests, much closer now, struggling in, the two boys on it frantic. The rain swept wet hair across his cheek and eyes and the side facing the wind grew more and more chilled, and he curled lower into the sand, following the boat's progress. It crested a whitecap and plunged toward the beach at full speed, the boy in back lying across the rudder to hold it steady, the boy in the bow trying to control the flapping, angry sail, both hands on the boom. It surged onto the shore with the dagger board being lifted out at the last possible moment and ground up onto the slope and the boys were jumping out and pulling it up farther, the sail collapsing and the mast teetering dangerously from side to side. Off in the distance to the right, where the sky was the blackest, white flashes lit the lighthouse marking the midpoint of the Sound.

"Leave it," one of the boys shouted. "We'll come back and get it," and there was another flash, and they pulled the boat still farther up the beach, the hull's slide an overamplified sweep of sandpaper, and they dropped the mast and turned and ran for the boat ramp. They were not dressed for the rain. One stopped and called over, asking if Biddy was all right. "I wouldn't stick around, kid," he called, and they looked at each other when he didn't respond, and shrugged, and were soon gone.

The storm drove the waves before it, the crests surging through the high-water mark, and they crashed and rolled toward the tilted stern of the beached boat, edging the detached rudder backward. With a third great wave it began to slide, and Biddy got up, opening still-warm areas of his body to the cold and wet, and jogged down to the water's edge, the water foaming no colder than the rain around his toes, the darkness otherworldly. He pulled the rudder across the hull and slipped it under the mast. The hull was a slick, light blue, wider than either a Sunfish or a Sailfish. On a fold in the sail he could make out a circle with an SK-8 inscribed in the center, and a plate near the mast explained the wordplay: "Skate." He had never heard of one. Lightning flowered high above him, the thunder rolling softly in behind. The Sound was a deep green flecked with white in the darkness, and the boat was fully rigged, all the lines relaxed but still figure-eighted in the stanchions. The darkness seemed to cloak the soft edge of Long Island beyond.

He put two hands on the bow and pulled sideways, dragging it around, and faced the nose to the water. He slipped the rudder into the locking pins. He had never sailed a sailboat before and he lifted

the mast, staggering under its weight, and guided it into its hole, the metal on metal making a sliding, secure, locking sound. He experimented with the sail, lifting it a bit. The wind felt smoother but still strong. There was only a single line, running along the boom, to manipulate, its operation easy to understand — pulling on it lifted the sail. He eased out the rudder extension. He waded into the water, his legs disappearing in the surging green, debris tickling his thighs, and pulled. The rain spattered the surface into a kind of electric life. The boat resisted, then relented, sliding forward to hit the waves with a slap, the bow buoyed high, the stern lifting free of the land and spinning with the wind. He remained alongside, waist-deep, then chest-deep, and lifted himself aboard, the boat sweeping rapidly along the shore while he scrabbled around freeing the boom and hoisting the sail line, turning the rudder. With the sail halfway up, the rudder found the right angle and the boat jumped away from the shore, rocking him backward.

The rapidity of his progress unnerved him, as did the receding, darkening shoreline. He was cutting a swift diagonal away from the beach, the spray from the bow distinguishable in its warmth and saltiness from the rain. A motorboat, its canvas covers down, turtled by, waves lashing at its sides. The possible power of the storm began to frighten him, and he felt uncertain of his ability to bring the boat about but knew he could not pursue a diagonal course the whole way across. He paused, amazed at himself, wondering what he really hoped to do. He had to bring the boat about one way or the other, he realized, and he held the sail, jerked the rudder, and the boat spun right, cutting a wide arc through the water, and the sail collapsed with a ruffle and a bang on his head. It bounced to his shoulders and then to the hull, slipping off into the swell. The shroud filled with dark Sound and he was suddenly dead in the water, waves breaking over the hull in sheets and draping seaweed across his knees, and the faint drone of the motorboat was returning, and the boat showed on his stern, chuffing through the waves as if on a watery treadmill. It turned, its side bumping his long hull gently, and its engines idled down, still fighting the current. A bit of canvas flap unsnapped, water splaying and dancing from its corner, and a hand and face appeared.

“You all right, son?” a voice called. “We’ll get you a towline.”

The shore was visible. The wind was beating them onto the beach.

“I’m okay,” he called. “I live right here. We’re almost on the beach.” He pointed.

There was some rapid movement under the canvas, and the engines throttled up. They shouted something he couldn’t make out. The boat slipped away, farther out, and turned and edged back in. Its

bow rose against the side of the sailboat, the prow leaning out of the rain alongside him over the sailboat's hull, and the engine roared briefly, surging them forward. They were giving him a push. He pulled the rudder around, spinning the nose into the shore, and waved. The little motorboat gave a blast of its air horn and disappeared into the darkness.

He was off the hull, shoulder-deep in the warm water, wading in. The boat was hard to control, his feet braced against barnacled rocks. He struggled and pulled, and when the hull slipped onto shore the water rushed from the downed sails with a torrential noise. He pulled the boat higher and higher and sat down after the final pull exhausted and wet, shaking. Lightning illuminated the sky to the east now, having passed without coming very near. The mast stood outlined against the sky and the sail flapped resolutely as it lost water, flapped as if in response to what had just occurred, and continued to flap, behind him, as he walked up the beach, heavy-legged, and stooped to dig up his towel, water-soaked and sandy, before continuing up the stone steps for home.

Drawing the Walk

He's a good kid: there's no reason to foam at the mouth over all of this. We have to keep some kind of perspective.

You watch this kid day to day and you'll see what I mean. He gets up, he enjoys things, he gets along with his sister, he's got lots of friends, he does well in school. We're talking about a kid who's got a lot going for him here. Sure he's quiet; he's sensitive. Okay, he's sensitive. You don't have to be Kreskin to figure that out. Maybe he gets hurt easier than most kids. But the thing to remember here is not to overreact. If the kid doesn't have a serious problem we may give him one before we're through.

Most of the time we don't even know what's going on. We can't protect him from everything that might upset him. Things stay with him. Whether it's one thing or another. Everything at home might be all smiles and he might spot a dog outside dragging by on three legs. What are you going to do? How much can you insulate him? For instance: we drove to Florida a few years ago and got off 95 in Georgia because of construction. We took a back road and in the middle of it in front of a gas station we came across this wolfhound or something. It was a big white dog, like a sled dog, really a beautiful animal — dead, on its back, twisted around with its paws in the air. Stiff. Cars were going around it. The guys in the gas station just left it out there. Well, that was it for Biddy's vacation. We might as well have taken the dog to the beach with us. And I had to go back that way, on the way home, to show him the goddamn thing wasn't still out there, paws in the air.

I'm not trying to gloss over anything or say there's no cause for concern. I'm just saying let's look at the whole picture here; let's try and put these things into some kind of context.

Kristi sat in the bright sunlight by an anthill, scraping a spoon on the pavement, back and forth, back and forth. The sound produced was not in any way musical or pleasant.

Biddy was at her bedroom window, looking down at her in the middle of the driveway. He looked down without opening the screen, his forehead bumping it a bit. "What're you doing?" he finally said.

"Nothing."

The sky was bright blue over the houses opposite him and he could feel the heat and smell the morning through the screen. "Listen. I'm going to take some paper from your desk, okay?"

"No. Get outta there."

"I need it."

"No."

"I'm going to take some old homework, okay?"

His sister scraped, legs facing the sun. The pavement was cracked and dry around her.

"Okay?"

"Don't take any of my pictures."

"I won't." He opened the bottom drawer stuffed with dittoed sheets filled with Kristi's handwriting. She made blocky, different-sized letters, an "a" bigger than the "t" next to it, an occasional letter capitalized, the words and sentences climbing or descending heedless of any lines provided.

He was looking for something with ample margin so that he could use the front as well as the back; he preferred not to scatter games in a series over different pieces of paper.

He stopped at a folded piece of brown scrap paper with a drawing of a crying flower on it. Over the flower Kristi had written, "Now This is a Story you'll never For Get." He opened it. Inside was a drawing of a huge rabbit, expressionless, seemingly without any legs. "Ones there was a Bunny and the Bunny was so happy That He fell and hurt Him self, But he got Back up and hurt Him self agen and when he got in the house The Mother lookt at Him and He had a fefer and that was the end of the Bunny and that is the end of my Story."

He continued to leaf through the pile. After a series of similar drawings he came upon a ditto that said "I don't like to do things because …" His sister had listed five things, numbered:

1. I don't like to go to the beach because there's see weed.

2. But I don't like to play with little kids because they jump on you.

3. I don't like to show my pictures because I don't like them.

4. I don't like to get lost in a crowd because some one could take you.

5. I don't like my dog.

He made a face and turned it over, sitting forward in her chair. He pulled out "Things I Like About Myself":

I like the way I swim with Lisa.

I like the way I do wheelies.

And I feed the dog.

I like when I play socker.

Halfway down the page, "Things I Don't Like About Myself":

I don't like the way I eat.

My closit is a disaster.

I hate the way my brother looks.

He sat back and shut the drawer, taking the page with him. He got out into the sun in just his shorts, with the page, his dice, and a pencil. He squinted. The leaves on the trees were bright and blinding and the white of the garage forced him to avert his eyes.

His sister was still scraping. Every so often she'd hold the spoon up and examine it critically before resuming. It struck him that she was no happier than he was, and no one would ever know. She volunteered nothing.

"What're you doing?" he asked, shading his eyes.

"I'm getting it sharper." She held it up, testing the edge with her thumb.

"Wait'll they see what you're doing with the spoon," he said, sitting down himself a few feet away and spreading the paper out in front of him. Ants were following an invisible track nearby.

"That's nice," his father said from the kitchen window. "I got a beautiful yard and my kids play in the driveway."

"It's nice and warm," Biddy said, rolling the dice.

"You can't sit in the sun in the grass?"

"The grass is wet."

There was a rattling and a grinding sound from around the house and Simon labored into view, his bicycle wobbling up the driveway as he stood all of his weight on the pedals, one after the other. Something was wrong with the chain and had been wrong with it for weeks, and no one had fixed it for him. He lived a few houses down and was Kristi's age.

Biddy said hello. Simon ground to a halt, perched high on the pedals, tipping to one side. He just got his foot out to catch his balance, legs spread wide, as the bicycle came down with a little crash on the pavement.

"Hi," he said.

He stood beside Kristi, watching her. They looked like brother and sister except his hair was still lighter than hers — white, in bright sun — and as fine as Biddy's. Most people's blue eyes, Biddy had noticed, were predominantly gray, but Simon's, like Kristi's, were blue.

"Get out of the way," Kristi said. "You're in the sun."

Simon moved. He moved when she told him to move. He moved when nearly anyone told him to move. He was a nice kid, and got beat up a good deal.

"Don't leave your bike all over the driveway," Kristi said. "My father'll run it over."

Simon picked it up and wheeled it onto the grass.

Biddy called him over. "Want to play dice?" he asked.

Simon said no.

"He doesn't know how," Kristi said.

Simon looked at him as though he had no excuse.

His father came outside carrying a bucket with an oversized sponge in it. "Hey, Simon. What's up?"

"Hi," Simon said.

"Kristi, what are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"Well, get out of the driveway. You too, Biddy. I'm going to back the car out."

Simon wandered back to his bike and hunched over it, poking at the chain. Biddy followed. Simon's fingers edged in on the teeth of the gear sprocket, slipping along black grease. "It sticks or something," he said in explanation, gazing at it as if it had always stuck and would always stick.

"Want to put some oil on it?" Biddy asked.

"No, my father'll fix it." He stood the bike up and got on the seat, wavering. His parents were divorced and he lived with his mother, rarely seeing his father.

"Bye," he said. "Bye, Kristi." He pushed, rocking forward toward the handlebars in the effort, grinding his way back down the driveway, and turned out into the street. The front wheel wove its way along from side to side like a dog's exploring nose.

Biddy's father paused to watch, slopping soapy water on the vinyl roof of the car. "That poor little son of a bitch," he said. "All he does is ride up and down the street on that bike."

"Are we going out tonight, by the way?" his mother called from the house. She was not visible.

"Going out?" His father paused, sweeping the sponge in a dark track across the vinyl. "No. *The Game of the Week* is on."

"Wonderful." Biddy could not place his mother's voice at all; it might well have been coming from any room on that side of the house. "Terrific. Baseball."

His father whistled the beginning of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

"All summer I get baseball. We watch baseball. We go to see baseball. We play baseball. We're in our second childhood here."

"I realize one game a week is unbearable," his father said.

His mother appeared at the screen on the porch. "It's not one game a week. I wish it was. We talk baseball. That's how we get through to each other. When we do. When do you talk with him anymore?" She flashed a hand at Biddy. "And what do you talk about when you do? 'Oh, the Orioles pissed that one away.' He does the same thing now. He doesn't talk about things when he's upset. He talks baseball. You're getting him as crazy as you are."

"Well, we're all emotional cripples here."

His mother turned away from the screen.

His father's arms had stopped, soap drying in streaks on the car. "And it's baseball that did it. It's not normal. Who ever heard of a

father and son talking baseball? I think he should learn Sanskrit instead," he said to the house. "And we should hold weekly discussion groups to go over everything and make sure nothing's wrong." He resumed soaping, the only other sound the scraping of Kristi's spoon on the pavement, the house quiet and giving no indication that anyone inside had heard.

Later that night they watched *The Game of the Week*. Biddy and his sister were sprawled on the floor with the dog; their parents were in the two big chairs with the lamp between them. It was a small den. His feet went under his father's chair and his head, his mother complained, was much too close to the television.

The Orioles were leading the Royals in the third inning. Doug DeCinces led off with a long, looping double to right center, and as he slid into second Biddy's father got up and changed the channel. A young woman hitched up her dress and ran across a railroad yard covered with the bodies of men in gray uniforms. He looked back over his shoulder at his father, waiting for an explanation. But his father only turned to his mother and remarked that it had been a good thing they hadn't gone out. His mother didn't respond.

Biddy gave it a few minutes before he finally said, "What is this?"

"*Gone With the Wind*," his father said. "Good movie."

At the commercial Biddy rose to all fours and reached out, awkwardly, and flipped the dial.

"What're you doing, Biddy?" his mother asked.

"I'll switch it back," he said. Dauer was standing on third and Kansas City had a new pitcher. He waited but nothing happened; the pitcher was warming up, so he turned back.

"You know," his mother said, and at first he was unsure whom she was addressing, "it's not like we go anywhere at all. And that's not even the point. The point is that it doesn't seem to matter anymore, what I want, what I'd like. It's like if that fits into the plans, fine."

"It does matter," Biddy's father said.

His mother returned her attention to the movie.

Biddy watched with her, the air humid and unmoving with the window open. Armies marched and cities burned. Men and women gazed at each other like starving animals or religious zealots. Kristi yawned and squashed a tiny spider creeping by on the rug.

His father went into the kitchen during a commercial and returned with a big glass noisy with ice.

"What's that?" his mother asked. "You didn't get me one?"

"You want one? I'll get you one. Collins?" His father gestured with the glass. She nodded.

They were quiet with their drinks for two or three scenes. His

mother moved her chair closer and his father put an arm around her. The movie boomed on. There was some whispering and Kristi said, "I'm trying to hear."

At the commercial his mother went into the bathroom. When she came out, they both said good night and went to bed, shutting the bedroom door lightly.

Biddy looked at Kristi.

"I guess they made up," she said. "See what else is on."

Two days later, they drove to Yankee Stadium. Eight of them, the Sieberts and Lirianos: Biddy, his mother, father, Kristi, Louis, Mickey, Ginnie, and Dom, for a game with the Brewers. Only Cindy remained home, preferring to watch *The Band Wagon* on television with her fiancé.

They sat in the United Technologies box and his father felt lucky to have the seats. The Lirianos were in the front four, Louis at eighteen taller than his parents. He ate popcorn one piece at a time, gazing serenely out toward Gorman Thomas in center field and the scoreboard above him even as plays were made in the infield. Mickey, next to him, squirmed or groaned according to events on the field, banging his hands on the rail in front of him when Robin Yount ranged behind second only to have a ground ball carom up over his shoulder into center field. Lou Piniella drove one into right field and the lead runner came around to score when Ben Oglivie of the Brewers slipped fielding the ball. The box was quiet. His father had no particular favorite and Dom felt that rooting for the Yankees was like rooting for IBM. Biddy was an Orioles fan and they were two games behind New York in the pennant race. Louis cheered decorously. Dave Winfield stepped to the plate. The sky was blue and clear and tracked by birds in the distance. The Milwaukee outfield was spread pleasingly against the green of the grass and wall beyond. Thomas arched his back in center, legs spread, and Oglivie stood relaxed and poised, despite his error, waiting for the pitch.

Over his shoulder Dom suggested beers, and insisted he had it and that Biddy's father could pay for the next round. After searching briefly for one of the wandering vendors, he stuffed some bills into Biddy's hand and told him two beers and to take Louis with him, since he was eighteen, and to have him do the ordering.

Biddy walked up the steps, looking back every so often at Winfield's cuts, with Louis following, crunching popcorn.

"What do they want?" Louis said, standing in line.

Biddy shrugged, hearing a roar, and craned his head around to try and see back out onto the field.

The line moved up. "Two beers," Louis said loudly. The man

across the counter flicked the taps back and filled two yellow paper cups with foamy beer. “Two-fifty,” he said. Louis laid two of the singles Biddy had given him on the counter and fished in his pocket for change. He set a quarter on the glass.

The man stared at him evenly. “One more, pal,” he said. Louis blinked, out of bills.

Biddy stepped closer. “A quarter,” he said. “He needs another quarter, Louis.”

“A quarter?” Louis said.

“What is he, retarded?” someone said from the back of the line.

Biddy pulled him out of line. Louis told the story back at the box. Dom left, Biddy’s father calling after him, asking what he was going to do. Winfield was on second. After Dom disappeared, Biddy asked what had happened.

His father returned his attention to the field. “Oh, Oglivie again. The son of a bitch looks like he’s on skates out there. They better get him some new shoes or new feet or something.”

Dom came back down the aisle escorted by two policemen. He stabbed the air with his finger, looking back over his shoulder and saying, “And I’ll tell you what. If that yim-yam says something like that again, I’ll kill him. You tell him that.”

“Awright, siddown,” the policeman said. “And thank Christ you’re still here.”

Ginnie and Judy were too embarrassed for anything but anger, and they didn’t move or speak the rest of the game.

“Son of a bitch,” Dom said to himself.

The game limped on, the box quiet. In the seventh with the score 3–0 New York, Ben Oglivie blasted a home run into deep center field with two Brewers on base. Dom stood to applaud and sat back down. Biddy watched Oglivie round third, struck by the efficiency with which he had redeemed himself.

In the ninth Willie Randolph homered for the Yankees and they all got up to go, collecting bags and hats while everyone was still cheering.

“Those poor bastards aren’t going anywhere,” Dom said, looking back at the disconsolate Brewer dugout. “No pitching.”

At the top of the aisle Biddy turned and saw the scoreboard in center blink and change, proclaiming a final in Cleveland: CLEVE 5, BALT 4, dropping the Orioles three back, and he turned to follow his family and friends down the exit ramp.

Kristi had two turtles, Foofer and Kid, and killed them both. Foofer had crawled onto a small stone she had put in the clear plastic terrarium where the turtles were kept and had gotten out, flopping

onto his chin with a distinctly wooden noise as she watched. She had done nothing, allowing him to creep across the desk top until he came to the edge, and then had opened the drawer underneath and toppled him in, shutting it with a bang.

Biddy, who'd been in her room collecting more paper, had said, "Kristi, don't leave him in the drawer."

"He always gets out," she said.

"You can't punish a turtle," he said. "Take the rock out of there and he won't get out."

She'd replaced the turtle, but days later, seeing only Kid, he'd opened the drawer to find the dried Foofer, half buried under pens and small plastic rulers in his search for moisture or an exit.

Kid had disappeared a few days later.

Kristi, her father said, was erratic. Her mother worried about her. She had more trouble at Our Lady of Peace than her brother did, although he seemed to be rapidly closing the gap. Sister Theresa had long since decided and informed the Siebert family by letter and consultation that neither her conduct nor her effort was all it could be. In fact, she did not, ever, behave like a little lady. Biddy had at least been a very good student at her age.

She despised the nuns and disliked school generally. At times he would be called down from his classroom to help discipline his sister, although how he was expected to help he was never able to fathom. He would at those times look into her defiant eyes with embarrassment, irritation, and pride. She seemed beyond him then, the intensity of her anger and unhappiness revealing itself in fleeting words or gestures that seemed unnoticed or ignored by the others around her. He was never much help. To the Sisters she was as unpredictably ferocious as a cornered raccoon or a small, angry cat. At one point while he looked on she had wrenched herself free from Sister Mary of Mercy, tearing the sleeve of her habit, and had been slapped for her trouble. A kind of horrified and fascinated silence had ensued while they all stared at the black sleeve hanging loose and ragged away from Sister's arm, even the slap forgotten in the strange blasphemous image before them. Nuns were rarely touched and Kristi's assault on the taboo had made her famous throughout the school; to an extent it was as if they'd seen God bleed.

Lady, too, seemed edgy, unprepared, around her, and Kristi was the only human being Lady had ever bitten. Biddy had been present for that bit of history as well: she'd been nipped across the tips of her fingers one hot day after sitting on the dog as she lay in the shade. Lady had growled and Kristi had slapped her nose and she had spun around and snapped. She'd slapped back fiercely, the force of her hand spraying saliva from the dog's mouth, before erupting into tears.

Lady had lain in the shade throughout all the following chaos, unrepentant. His father had yelled at Lady so loudly that her ears had flattened, but she had remained bristling and stubborn, as though she could not be blamed for an altercation with Kristi. When Biddy had seen the size of the needle at the doctor's, he'd thought it was some kind of awful joke, but his sister had remained grim and silent until the needle had gone in; then she had screamed.

"How'd Louis get retarded?" she asked. She was flipping cards, bored with diamonds and spades.

They sat at the redwood table in the backyard, swishing their bare feet back and forth through the grass, slapping mosquitoes, scratching bites. Biddy was looking back over the Brewers-Yankees scorecard.

"He was born that way," he said.

"So he's never going to get better?"

"No."

"Do you like having him around?"

He looked up. "Why? You don't like him?"

"It's funny," she said, squinting. "I feel bad for him, but it's kind of creepy."

"Louis is nice."

She didn't reply. "I remember him looking down at me when I was little and honking and scaring me," she finally said. Biddy made a face and she added, "He honks when he talks."

His father came out and sat next to them, drink in hand.

"What's that?" Biddy asked.

"Milk of Magnesia," his father said. "What're you, a cop?"

They were quiet as it got darker, and Kristi slapped at another mosquito. Her father said, "You guys're going to get eaten alive out here. Why don't you sit in the porch?"

"How come Louis plays with little kids?" Kristi asked.

"Are you a little kid?" her father teased. She ignored the comment and he cleared his throat. "Well, you know Louis doesn't always get along that great with kids his own age."

"He's retarded," she said.

"Now I don't want you throwing those words around. Either of you. Do you say that to him? Are you mean to him?" He looked at Biddy. "Is she mean to him?"

"No," Biddy said.

"I don't want you being mean to him, now. The poor son of a bitch's got enough problems. He's a good kid."

"Does everybody make fun of him?"

"It isn't easy for him. You should feel sorry for him."

Kristi collected her cards into a pile. She'd gotten a little sun at the game and her nose and cheeks were pink.

"There's nothing wrong with him playing with you guys. Or with all of us."

The house was becoming simply a shape in the gloom. Biddy sat staring into the darkness beyond it, trying to imagine what it would be like to be Louis.

"He's a good kid," his father repeated, getting up to go. "That Mickey's harder to take than he is. I don't want you kids bothering him."

Biddy shook his head to agree not to, his eyes still focused out into the distance, but in the gloom all but the most emphatic gestures were lost.

The next few days were spent in preparation for school as much as for the Air Show. Biddy was fitting into a new uniform, Kristi had outgrown her shoes, and they both needed school supplies and enough other shit to choke a horse, as his father put it. So the announcement that they were flying to the Hamptons for the weekend, getting a free ride with a friend who commuted to Sikorsky by Cessna, surprised everyone, and excited only Biddy.

"What're we going to do in the Hamptons," his mother said, spooning out peas.

"Nothing. Hold our hand on our ass," his father said. "The vacation spot of the East, and she wants to know what we're going to do there."

"Where're we going to stay?"

"We'll stay with the Carvers. Look, if you don't want to go—"

"I'd love to go. I have my heart set on going. Your friends are my friends," his mother said.

His father took the spoon from her hand and piled more peas onto his plate. "You bring a lot to the party, you know it?" he said.

"I know it," his mother said. "Sometimes I'm not all I'm supposed to be. I know that, too."

Late that Friday afternoon they drove around Lordship to Bridgeport Airport. It took, he thought as they drove through the main gate, longer than it would have had they just walked to the end of their street and gone under the hurricane fence.

Mr. Carver pulled up in a little Datsun and hurried over, a short heavy man in a white shirt with a dirty collar. He switched hands with his briefcase and gave Biddy's hand a firm single shake. He did not look like Biddy's idea of a pilot, but the very idea of that much spatial freedom — the ability to go, almost literally, in any direction one wanted, to be free of the confining limits of even roads or tracks —

excited Biddy so that he could not keep back his desire to want to admire this man, peering at his physical exterior as if searching for evidence of the marvelous skill underneath. Carver was introduced to everyone and seemed polite and noticeably impatient. He was visibly unhappy about Kristi, and Biddy wondered guiltily if his father had even mentioned her. She'd sit in her mother's lap, next to Biddy in the back.

The Cessna seemed a tiny car with wings. The cockpit was cramped. Biddy pressed his face to the glass, unable to completely believe this machine and that man would take them off the face of the earth.

From the back seat he asked a series of questions. Because of the weather they'd be flying VFR, navigating visually, Mr. Carver related. What he was doing at this point was the preflight checklist. It was no more difficult than it seemed, he said. Biddy sat back, bewildered by the simplicity of the process. Carver went on explaining, but his words were lost in the roar as the engine kicked over.

They took off slowly, banking sharply around to the left toward the Sound, Biddy feeling a shock and excitement as the wheels left the ground and his neighborhood and street swept away and below. Everyone looked out windows, and he waited for the plane to sideslip abruptly and smash into the ground after a fluttering spin. The reeds of the salt marsh flashed by below and then the thin stretch of beach, and then they were over the ocean, blue and choppy. No one spoke. Mr. Carver said something to his father now and then.

Biddy watched the man's hands on the controls. It seemed inexpressibly marvelous that a human being could do this. Carver seemed to be paying no more attention than his father did when he drove. Like the car, the Cessna seemed to need only an occasional gentle correction.

The diminutive East Hampton Airport was in the middle of nowhere, a flat tan strip surrounded by the dark green of a pine forest. As they banked around to their approach pattern he could make out a path through the pines leading away from the runway they'd be coming in on. He could see children on bicycles riding along it toward a connecting road before the gray of the runway abruptly swung up to meet them and he had a sense of hurtling onto a paved strip with only Mr. Carver to deliver them. The gray swept past them and they touched down, Carver steady and unperturbed at the controls, the pavement reeling past the wing hypnotically as he watched.

They drove to a house off the road and hidden by bushes and trees, a big yellow irregular box that looked as if they could work on it for weeks, painting, fixing screen doors, and refastening gutters, and still have much to do. The Carvers had no children, so Biddy and

Kristi would sleep on cots in the spare room upstairs. From the window he could see the farmland bordering the backyard, neatly arranged in huge mosaics almost all the way down to the water, a half mile away.

Everything went well. They drove up to Sag Harbor Saturday morning, following the black two-lane road to the end of the North Haven peninsula and taking the short ferry ride to Shelter Island. They played golf at Gardiners Bay, Biddy and Kristi trooping along behind the adults over the beautiful misty fairways, hacking away at their golf balls, delighting in the springy feel of the greens beneath their feet. Afterward, they drove along Ram Island Drive with the windows open, the sea smell filling the car and the bay quiet and wide and huge to the west. They stopped along docks at the water's edge, nosing around dingy small boats tied nearby. Mr. Carver talked of the islands to the east, Plum Island and Great Gull Island and others, and of their beauty and solitude. The quality of the light conferred a special clarity on the land and sea in the distance, making the water fresh and blue. Gulls' cries echoed over the surface and the boats quietly thumped one another with the arrival of an occasional wave from a far-off speedboat. They bought dinner in a seafood restaurant with nets hanging over the tables. On Sunday they lay in the hot sun and crested and splashed in tumbling breakers at the beach when it got too hot. That evening they showered and sat in lounge chairs in the back, cool and relaxed in the breezy darkness, unbothered by mosquitoes. He slept luxuriously on the cot, a hand or foot draped over the sharp-cornered edges.

They flew back early Monday morning. Carver pumped Biddy's hand goodbye and Biddy found it difficult finally to lift his other hand from the smooth metal of the fuselage. His parents saw their host off in his Datsun, thanking him repeatedly and insisting they get together soon, and then exploded into argument once he'd left. Something his father had done or not done or gotten or not gotten was the cause of it all. His mother had said nothing until safely in Stratford. She was, his father said as they crossed behind the Sikorsky hangar to their car, an Italian land mine.

Later in the week, Biddy and Louis were picked up by the yellow security jeep at the airport for playing too close to the runway. Biddy had been drawn back to the Cessnas and they'd strayed too far from the edge of the salt marsh, daring each other onto the tarmac. Louis had been staying over for the day and his father had expressed the hope that they'd find something sedate to do.

They were kept out in the driveway after being dropped off with a warning, his father pacing in front of them.

“It’s not your fault, Louis,” he said. “This bonzo should’ve known better.”

“We were only on the runway for a second,” Biddy said. “The rest of the time we were in the reeds.”

“What, that’s better? There’re rats and all sorts of shit in there. You were asked to stay around, do something a little sedate, but no. It’s like talking to a wall. You can’t find your ass with both hands and you’re wandering around those paths back there. And dragging this poor soul with you.” Louis looked up, embarrassed. “What has to happen? What does it take to get through? Does one of those planes have to take your head off? Does a rat have to bite you on the ass?”

Six and three: Singleton lines out; runners hold. Six and one: Murray reaches on an error. Two and four: Roenicke pops up. One and one: Dauer strikes out. No runs, three left on base.

Preparations for the Air Show: his father stood in the sunny area of the driveway, washing chaise longues and lawn chairs with a hose. His mother and Kristi edged around the bushes bordering the yard, trimming and cleaning out odd piles of debris, his mother snipping and pulling efficiently, Kristi raking with the three-pronged hand rake listlessly, uselessly. He sat at the redwood table, rolling dice.

“Get a rake,” his father said, splashing water. “Give your mother a hand.”

With Randolph and Mumphrey on base in the ninth, Winfield homered. He rolled a few more times and then carefully wrote, “Balt. 5, N.Y. 6.”

“Biddy, are you deaf?”

“No sense getting excited,” his mother said from across the yard without turning. “He doesn’t listen to me, either.”

“Keep playing with those dice.” His father returned his attention to a chair. “That’s a good thing to do with your time. Useful.”

Biddy looked at the dice in his hand.

“You could be reading, it’s a beautiful day, you could’ve gone to the beach. … Who was that kid from school? Teddy? Why doesn’t he come around anymore? You could’ve done a lot today, instead of sitting around bored. But sit around,” he said. “Improve your mind.”

He could’ve done a lot of things. He could do a lot of things. Lying in bed that night, he realized that: like sliding belly up onto the roof with Teddy’s BB gun, edging off the ladder just before dawn. The spaniel next door would bark when the shingles crunched and popped as he put his full weight on them, swinging his legs up. He’d creep to the peak of the roof, rest the barrel lightly between the top of the basketball backboard and its two-by-four support, and wait.

He liked this one, he mused, turning in bed. He pumped up the gun, increasing the tension on the firing mechanism until he felt it would explode in his hands if he handled it roughly.

And the sun came out red and weak, and Lady was let out. She ran around the yard sniffing and urinating and went back in without seeing him.

And his mother and sister set up for the Air Show.

And when Dom arrived and edged from the car with two trays of rolled prosciutto and ham and a bottle of cherry peppers held lightly by his chin against his chest, he sighted down the barrel and fired quickly, *thonk thonk thonk,* at the hunched figure, and the jar made a musical *plish* and dropped away magically from beneath the cap, peppers and juice streaming and tumbling down his dark blue chest. And he swung his rifle, *thonk,* and Lady yelped, splaying out a hind leg, and swung it back, *thonk,* and Dom yelped and sent two trays of meats cascading up and over, the meats fluttering pink and the trays spinning silver. And down along the TV trays in a crooked line: *pling plang plung,* the sound to mix with Dom's silver trays coming down on the driveway.

And they all rushed him at once, Lady, Dom, his father, his mother, with scaling ladders and needle-sharp bayonets, with bright blue tunics and long white sabers, or dark blue police suits and long brown clubs, or sweaty red bodies and painted, feathered faces, and he stood and fired from the hip, levered Teddy's Winchester up and down, kicked away tomahawks and sabers, nightsticks and savage hands.

The sun seemed bright and cold the morning of the Air Show. Biddy had been awake and outside with his mother before seven, while it was still clear and chilly. He lay on his belly on the warming pavement of the driveway, gazing vacantly down the street at Simon's yard. Kristi was playing with Simon, Simon in the wagon, the wagon at the top of the driveway, the driveway a long coast to the street. Simon rattled the handle. Cindy's car turned onto the street and with a shove Kristi sent him out and down the incline, the red wagon gaining speed all the way down the driveway and it occurred to Biddy that it wasn't going to stop. It bounced once, jiggling Simon and making him puppetlike, and swept out in front of Cindy's car, which jerked and bucked and turned aside. The wagon continued across the street and onto the lawn opposite, pitching over and tumbling Simon out. Cindy got out of her car and stood surveying the scene, looking tiny and ineffectual in the distance. She said something to both Simon and Kristi, and got back in and continued to Biddy's driveway. The car grew as it cruised up the pavement toward him. He didn't move and

the bumper stopped above him.

Later, in the chaise longue, Cindy said, “Biddy, you’re going to have to watch that kid. His mother obviously isn’t going to.”

“Can I taste that?” he asked, pointing to her drink.

“It’s too early in the morning for you to be drinking.” She had on a white bathing suit with light brown straps. One leg tapered along the length of the chaise longue; the other had slipped off and lay on a diagonal between grass and chair.

“Why isn’t it too early for you?”

“I’m engaged,” she said, turning on the chaise longue without opening her eyes.

“Where’s Ronnie?”

“He’s coming. He’s getting some stuff at the bakery.” Her arm dangled vaguely at a plastic bottle in the grass. “Put some lotion on me?”

“What’s he getting?”

She took a sip of her drink, her glass intricately beaded with condensation. “Don’t you want to put some lotion on me? Want me to fry?”

He knelt in the grass near her, the plastic bottle hot and soft in his hands, and she said, “Get my legs first. I’m beginning to feel it on my legs.” He dabbed lotion on the top of her thigh.

The screen door slammed and his father went by. “When you’re finished there help me with the grill,” he said.

Her skin was hot under the sun and dry, wrinkling to his touch. She was peeling and he eased a flake away from the surface of her leg with his fingernail. The lotion glazed as it spread, moistening it and deepening the brown color. He did both legs and his hands were sticky.

“Put some more up by the suit,” she said, eyes still closed. “I always get burned there.” He put some dabs farther up and heard Ronnie’s car pull in behind hers down the driveway. “Rub it in, Biddy,” she said. “Want it to dry on me?” His middle finger touched the dab, broke the bubble, pressed further to the skin underneath.

“Isn’t this nice,” Ronnie said. “The Queen of Sheba.” Biddy turned, lotion on his fingers. “She’ll have you out here with a fan next.”

She didn’t open her eyes. “Finish up, Biddy,” she said.

“Aren’t you helping Judy?” Ronnie asked.

“I’ve been here for a while,” she said. “Everything’s ready. You’re in the sun.” Ronnie went into the house. “Grab a chair and come on out,” she called. She opened her eyes, hand cupped over them. “That’s enough, Biddy,” she said. “Thanks.”

He washed his hands twice, the stickiness elusive between his

fingers. “What time is Uncle Dom coming?” he asked Ronnie, stacking plates in the kitchen.

“Few hours,” he said. “He’s getting some provolone and prosciutto and that place is a nuthouse today.” He handed a full glass to Biddy. “You going back out? Take this out to her. It might as well be you as me.”

“I’m thinking about cutting my hair, Biddy,” she said. “What do you think?”

“Don’t,” he said. She opened her eyes. “I mean — it’s beautiful.”

“Well, thank you.”

He fumbled with a sneaker. “Who wants you to change it? Ronnie?” She continued to gaze at him. “For the wedding?”

“No. I don’t know, just for something different. But you like it, huh?”

He nodded, glad the embarrassment was over.

“Then I’ll keep it. C’mere.”

He reddened as he leaned forward and she kissed him, half on the mouth, half on the cheek.

“Go help your father with the grill,” she said softly.

An hour later they were starting to arrive, the Lirianos, the Pierces, the Sheas, the Terentieffs, the Cartenellis, and more.

The Air Show was about to begin.

The yard included a patio, a redwood table and some benches beside the clusters of lawn chairs and lounges, a large maple tree, a small maple tree, a gray cellar door adjacent to the house, a vegetable garden, and a fair number of bare spots. It was a small residential tract just barely suitable for a cramped game of Wiffle ball, bordered by the Frasers’ garage on one side and their own on the other. The garden was small and weedy, and the dog’s urine had browned the grass near the knee-high fence bordering it. A red tomato showed here and there, unpicked.

The backyard, with the garages and trees allowing some privacy, was where the Sieberts entertained. The front yard was a bare, flawless expanse boasting two dogwoods flanking a sidewalk leading to the front door, and that was all. On those rare occasions he played there Biddy felt as though he were onstage.

The backyard as well had an unencumbered upward view of the north, over the airport, perfect for the Air Show.

The Air Show included the U.S. Navy Blue Angels, an R.A.F. Harrier VSTOL (vertical takeoff and landing) jet, a World War II P-51 Mustang, a Bell Huey helicopter, a Sikorsky HH-52 helicopter, some skywriters, a U.S. Army parachute team, and a smallish orange plane

that stood on its tail and cut its engine and flew acrobatically. Biddy's job was to keep the soda moving, run for beers, and change empty cheese and meat platters for full ones. Everything wavered on TV trays on uneven ground, under the shadows of the leaves. People began to fill the backyard. The meat and cheese platters, as his father had predicted, began to take a beating.

The party was not a gathering for children, and Mickey Liriano was the only child present besides Biddy, hustling back and forth with empty or full trays, and Kristi, jealously guarding a chair in a prime viewing location. Mickey dealt with his isolation principally by throwing a rubber ball off the side of the garage with a relentless energy and fielding it, pausing only to retrieve a bad hop from the garden or let someone with drink in hand pass by.

His father called out at one point, "Listen, Cy Young, you want to give that a rest?" but gave up soon after.

Mickey was bored, Biddy knew. Kristi bored him and Biddy bored him and his older brother especially bored him, with his excessive patience and kindness and lack of speed in everything he did. The dog bored him, and didn't like him, besides. The food bored him. Throwing a ball against the side of the garage bored him, and when the Blue Angels came over they'd bore him as well. He brought and wore his Reggie Smith glove in the futile hope he could talk someone — his father, Biddy, anyone — away from the Air Show for a catch at least. He'd already asked more than once and was bored with asking. The rubber ball made almost no noise in his glove, and he threw it against the garage as though it were a hard ball.

Cindy and Ronnie stood under the big maple, talking and accepting congratulations on the engagement. She was wearing a gauzy light blue dress and he was in shorts and a tennis shirt. Biddy watched them for a short time before Ronnie called him over.

"How's tricks, champ," Ronnie said, sitting down. He was very close to his fiancée's knee and her dress drifted against his shoulder. "I hear you're finally getting the hang of second base."

Biddy winced, thinking of the game at the field. "Have you set a date?" he said.

Ronnie made a face. "This May. Memorial Day. Which is perfect."

"Why?"

He shook his head. "Just a joke. Where's your glove? Want to throw the ball around?"

"I'm gonna go down and see the Blue Angels come over from Long Island."

"How do you know they're going to do that?"

"My father told me. They're filling up at the Grumman plant over

there. Doesn't Cindy want you to hang around?"

Ronnie shrugged and looked up at her. "I'm like you. I'm not too good at this social stuff."

Biddy looked at his watch. The possibility of Phantom jets, in formation, at Lordship was making him impatient with everything else. "I should go. Mickey'd want to play."

"I believe it," Ronnie said. "I surely do believe it." He leaned around the tree. "Hey psycho. You want to throw it around?" Mickey waved and nodded. "That's a surprise," he said, and Biddy left, hurrying toward the blue Sound he could glimpse between the houses.

He didn't wait long at the bluffs: six black specks spread themselves along the horizon over Long Island, exciting and precise against the broad blue sky, growing in size and detail until he realized the center of the V formation would be coming right over him, and he waited as long as he could, taking in the royal-blue and yellow markings, the underwing detail, the hint of clear orange behind the exhaust, before running up the bluffs and down the street as they flashed over him, huge, seemingly only a few feet above the houses, the sound following behind like an invisible trailer as he ran, trying not to be left behind. He stopped, panting, to watch the six jets, all glowing orange, huge and powerful, commanding the skies, sweep over his house in the distance and drop into the basin of the airport beyond; he ran again only when they disappeared below the trees.

The Blue Angels streaked in low in close formation and flip-flopped and tore the sky apart with their roars, making huge bows in the sky with their vapor trails as they flew upside down. They came together from all directions, so close at the converging point that everyone below swore they were going to collide, and stood on their tails and climbed out of sight, or dove with a gradual building scream until below the houses and trees, and everyone half waited for the crash. The Mustang did loops and spins and participated in a mock dogfight. The helicopters skimmed the tree-tops. The small orange plane trailed orange and blue smoke and cut its engine frequently. And finally, when Dom mentioned while looking for his drink that he didn't know what they could do to top this, distant brown planes appeared, going over with a far-off buzz, with tiny figures falling away from them. "There're the parachutists!" his father said, and Biddy watched them spinning away and the chutes spilling out and up, filling square and bright.

"They're square," he said to no one in particular.

"All the new chutes are square," Dom said behind him. "Better control."

"Look at that guy," Mickey said. One was floating the opposite

way, as if delivering a message. Biddy could smell the hot dogs overcooking. The lone parachutist continued to grow larger, the four others gliding in a diamond pattern down toward the airport tower. They could see the parachutist pulling on one side, the top of the canopy dipping on that side, bobbing. Something there was hanging the wrong way, ragged.

"He ain't real good, is he?" Dom said, and then added, "You know, Walt, he could be coming here," and in the general excitement Biddy saw that he could and was, coming in low and hard, still pulling, not floating at all, swooping, and Biddy could see the frustration on his face and the shine on his boots.

"Jesus Christ," his father said suddenly, and began to herd the women out of the way, and the parachutist dipped lower and swung in fast, on top of them suddenly, and hit the roof, *bam,* with his big jumping boots and then was pulled off by his chute, his feet dragging and scraping over the TV antenna, snapping it as the canopy caught in the trees and he swung down, twisting to avoid people, catching a TV tray with watermelon on it and kicking it up over the clothesline in a rain of pink chunks and seeds. Some of the women screamed and the men ducked in and out trying to get a grip on the parachutist as he swung by shouting for them to watch out. He swept back and forth in front of Kristi, still in her chair, amazed and grinning.

On a backswing they managed to intercept him and hold on, dragging him back and forth to a stop.

Everyone spoke at once, including the parachutist; Biddy watched his sister, still staring, still grinning, and the only one still silent. Above her on the roof of the Frasers' garage the scattered pieces of watermelon glinted, wet and ridiculous in the sun.

And that night he thought about the parachutist with all the patches and pockets and buckles and harnesses, and how neat it would be to jump out of a plane and open up your parachute and come down, smash, on somebody's watermelon and sweep right through their lawn party.

The next morning he stood in the kitchen excited despite himself by the prospect of the first day of school. He was wearing a new white shirt which choked in a pleasant way, new gray pants, and a plaid tie. He was restless and ate little, leaving the table and drifting around the kitchen while his sister pushed a spoon back and forth through her oatmeal. His father bustled by. His mother put together two lunches. He went to the screen door to let Lady out, appreciating the morning light for its clarity.

In class Sister Theresa called the roll, calling the same names she had the year before, calling only the first names, twenty-seven of

them. Our Lady of Peace was a small school, of a nice, manageable, personal size, Sister liked to say, serving a small parish. There was little turnover and no growth in the size of the student body. This year one boy had moved away and a new girl, Kathy, was added to the class. She was big and quiet and reminded Biddy vaguely of a horse. Their instructor would be Sister Theresa, the principal, for the second year in a row. They did not consider themselves fortunate.

Books were handed out, new lessons begun, sides for kickball chosen, Mass and milk-money schedules announced, and the day went quickly. He trailed home behind his sister and a friend, who were banging lunch boxes in rhythm as they walked.

In the backyard he found his father hanging half on, half off a ladder.

"Dad!" he called. "Are you all right?"

His father didn't turn around, spread against the house. "Yes, I'm all right. I know what I'm doing here."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to fix the aerial our paratrooper kicked over."

"Why don't you just move the ladder?"

His father stopped and closed his eyes, exasperated. "Because I'm trying to keep a hand on this wire, too."

"You want help?"

"Not unless you're taller than you look."

He went into the house, threw his book bag on the dog's chair and his lunch box on the counter, and went down the cellar for an ice-cream sandwich. With the freezer open he heard the rattling metallic crash of the ladder.

He bolted up the stairs two at a time and rushed past his sister, who was eating an apple at the kitchen table, and out into the driveway.

His father was high above him swaying back and forth, slowly bending the lateral supports for the antenna downward.

"Dad!" he said. "What happened?"

"What the hell do you think happened? Where is everybody? Didn't anybody hear me yell?"

"I was down in the cellar."

"You got a good view of this? What are you standing there for? Get the ladder!"

He ran to the ladder. It was stuck in the thick hedges near the garden.

"What did you, lose interest? What're you doing?"

"It's stuck in the hedges. I'm trying not to wreck them."

"You're trying not to wreck them."

Mr. Fraser appeared near his garage. “You all right, Walt?”

“Fine, Bill. Can’t you tell? Biddy! Where’d he go now?”

Mr. Fraser bustled over and took hold of the ladder and yanked it free. He swung it back toward the house, suggesting they put it up next to him.

“No, Bill, put it up on the other side of the house, and I’ll crawl around.”

Kristi came to the screen. “Biddy, Mom wants you. Is Dad down yet? Hi, Mr. Fraser.”

“Hello, Kristi. Your father’s in a bit of trouble here.”

“Could we hurry with the ladder?”

“All right, Walt, don’t get excited. Got your foot in it? Get your foot in it.”

Biddy’s mother screamed. “Walt! What happened? Get down from there!”

“Isn’t this something? Everyone’s gone nuts,” his father said. He swung sideways and hooked his leg around the ladder.

It began to slip on Biddy’s side and he looked down to see it scraping across the cement and sliding away. He shot a look up and his father was tipping, the huge spiny antenna caught in his sleeve, the final twisted strip of metal holding it giving way with a tiny sharp sighing sound, and the ladder wrenched from his hands and spun away from him and up, his father arcing by overhead and clearing the driveway completely, coming down with a crash that neighbors three full blocks away later claimed to have heard.

And three days after that, when his father was just beginning to lose his limp and Biddy was sitting in the front yard playing dice baseball, he sent Lady out into the street, just because she was bothering him, and got her killed.

He had just rolled into a double play and Lady in her exuberance had run right across the page, demanding attention, and he’d yelled and shoved her rear, splaying it out to the side as she went by, and, spooked, she’d continued into the street and he’d seen it as he’d see it again and again, the dog trying to turn out of the way and ducking, her eyes closed and muzzle turned from the impact. There was the inanimate sound of someone dropping a large bag of flour to the pavement and she’d flown forward and rolled, finishing on her side in some gravel.

She was quiet, twitching, when he reached her. He squatted near disbelieving, touching her, thinking he should get her tongue out of the sand. He started crying and Mr. Fraser crouched beside him with a stick, prodding her with it until, satisfied, he took her by the loose skin of her neck and rear and dragged her out of the road and into the

grass. Biddy followed, dimly aware of the occupants of the car, a young girl and her boyfriend. “I feel just awful,” the girl said.

Mr. Fraser disappeared and returned with his pickup. He lowered the tailgate and dropped Lady in like a sack.

When he’d driven away Biddy had sprinted back to the house, past his mother running the opposite way, ignoring her questions. He’d run up the stairs and had climbed into the bathtub and pulled the shower curtain closed behind him and lay, face down, crying into the hard surface of the porcelain.

They didn’t find him. No one looked. There was an uproar when his father came home, slammed doors, a glass smashed against the back of the garage. His father had gone up and down the street barefoot and talking to himself. He’d finally gone into the garage and rolled the door shut to sit in the dark. And until very late that night that was the way the Sieberts had remained, Kristi and Judy in the kitchen, Walter in the garage, and Biddy upstairs in the bathroom.

He was hapless, an unspoken embarrassment. He was batting 1000. He had not reached base. And yet he was still there, still digging in, still unwilling to give up. He leaned in against Goose Gossage, clearly hearing over the crowd DeCinces’s admonition to wait him out. Gossage stood erect and slit-eyed on the mound. Behind him Bumbry edged crablike off second, alert. Protect the plate, he thought. But don’t go for a bad pitch. Gossage reared, growing larger as he uncoiled toward Biddy, and the ball was on him and he lashed at it way too late and struck out, staying where his swing had left him, the roar of the crowd filling his ears. Gossage walked free from the mound in one direction, Bumbry from second in another.

On the bench he was given undeserved support and encouragement. Don’t go for anything on the corners, DeCinces told him. Make him work for it. What’re you going to do with Gossage out there? Know what you can and can’t do. In this situation the best you can hope for is to draw the walk. They shifted, watching Murray bat. Patience. That ball was tailing away even before it broke in on you.

Biddy relived it and closed his eyes, trying to learn.

Ah, it’s easy for me to talk, DeCinces said. You’re scared. It’s a lot to face. Yankee Stadium, Goose Gossage, and the whole bit. But you’re gonna have to hang on because you’re not going to hit him. Not now anyway. You’re going to have to hang on because things don’t always work out that easy.

In the ninth Bumbry tripled and Singleton was intentionally walked and DeCinces, batting in front of Biddy, worked the count to 3 and 2 and fouled off three straight pitches before drawing a walk to load the bases. There were two outs and the Orioles were down by

one run, and all he could think as he advanced from the on-deck circle, swinging his bat in tight little circles, was: Why don't they pinch-hit for me?

The scoreboard flashed his batting average. The crowd roared. He could see his parents in the stands, having to look at those bright yellow numbers.

He hoped the first pitch would miss and it didn't. The crowd's roar intensified. The second was belt-high. He was down no balls and two strikes. The stadium shook with the anticipated strikeout. He couldn't look out toward first and DeCinces. Gossage reared, teetered, and lunged and the ball curved in and he swung, even as it dipped out of the strike zone.

He crouched beside the plate, head down. His ears filled with sound. Cerone and Gossage and the other Yankees crowded into the dugout accepting congratulations. The fans danced and gesticulated in their seats. DeCinces tapped the plate with a bat. C'mon, he said. This is just one time. You can feel as bad as you want but it's not going to change anything.

Every year there was a spirited debate about whether walks should be allowed at the Sikorsky father-son baseball game. A compromise was finally settled upon: the fathers would alternate pitching each inning with their sons. When the fathers pitched, they'd just lob it over and walks would be disallowed. When the sons pitched, things could get a little more serious.

Biddy's father stood on first base after getting a hit, looking hopefully at his son, who was up next. Biddy, he'd been telling people, was still wandering around like he was on Queer Street — like a punch-drunk fighter — and it had been a week and a half. He had stopped crying that same night in the bathtub. He'd shown no interest in the upcoming father-son game. He hadn't shown any interest in anything. It had been hoped that the game would help, so they had gone. As Dom had added, how could it hurt? Biddy had played so far as though he were in a coma.

The first time up he had taken three called strikes; the second, he'd been hit by a pitch and then picked off first. Now it was his third and final at bat, with men on first and third and the score tied, and he looked for all the world, stepping up to the plate bat in hand, as though he didn't care. The pitcher, a big kid, reared back and fired one in for a strike.

"Time!" Biddy's father called, and trotted in from first.

"Time?" the pitcher said.

"Time," he repeated. He stood close to Biddy. "You're not going to hit this kid," he whispered. "This kid could go bear-hunting with a

switch. Try and draw the walk. Okay?"

Biddy nodded, bat on shoulder.

He worked the count to 3 and 2, and took a sixth pitch that was almost in the dirt.

"Strike three," the umpire called.

His father rushed in from first to argue the call but stopped and looked at Biddy, uncertain whether to let it go or to argue all the more fiercely. Biddy closed his eyes and swung the bat gently to the ground, the noises and smells and feel of an unusually hot day in September on a baseball diamond dropping away, to be replaced by Lady's eyes, averted from the car bumper at the last instant, and her tongue, in the gravel by the side of the road.

II. *Thanksgiving*

MOM. *Stopping the Sweep*

Walter is not an alarmist. By no means is Walter an alarmist. He wants that made perfectly clear. If the kid's arterially bleeding, everyone remain calm; if he's slowly turning into someone we've never seen before, wait it out, watch and see what happens. Above all, do not overreact. His wife, you see, overreacts. I overreact. I scream and rant and ask questions and worry. I set a bad example. I get the kids all worked up. I give the kids ideas. I'm never satisfied and I'm always wrong. That might be a good rule to keep in mind here all the time: Judy is always wrong. Judy does not support this — mania for sports, one after another, season in, season out: Judy is wrong. Judy thinks we should talk a little, that we have to talk a little, to try and make the kids a little less impenetrable: Judy's wrong. Judy wants to do some of the things normal families do: Judy is a pain in the ass. But I'll tell you this: I saw trouble coming with these two long before I spoke up, and I spoke up a hell of a long time ago. I love these kids and I've loved them and agonized over them every step of the way and no one's going to tell me at this point that I'm the only villain in this thing. Judy might've made some mistakes, but I'll be goddamned if she made all of them.

There was a rope swing at the end of Prospect Drive, the street perpendicular to Biddy's, which was long and knotted and hung from high in the branches of an old oak. Prospect Drive, which ran the length of Lordship from the salt marshes to the Gun Club, met the salt marsh abruptly at that oak, the pavement and earth covering the roots dropping away to expose four feet of yellowish dirt running into cattails and reeds. Motorists were expected to have turned left for Long Beach or Lordship Boulevard by that point.

He had swung on the rope once, the grass below worn through to form a runway of dirt that fell away as he swept high over the reeds, the brown fur of the cattails waving up at him. It was slipperier than it looked.

One of Biddy's friends, Teddy Bell, lived nearby, on Oak Bluff. Teddy had serious fights with his older brother, Neil, fights of frightening intensity, four or five times a week. Teddy was Biddy's classmate and Neil a year older. They came to blows over everything. Neil had once tried to break his brother's arm by levering it across his leg. Friends had pulled them apart. Their fights were approaching legend in the neighborhood and Biddy had seen three, convinced during each that one brother or the other would not survive.

And one day Teddy broke his wrist on the rope swing. He slipped off on the downswing. He came home crying and was mocked and

goaded until his wild temper broke loose and he went after his older brother with a shriek and one arm, and Neil, who usually won anyway, beat him up. Their father separated them and threw Neil bodily out of the house—"The goddamn kid's got a hurt arm!" he'd yelled — and Neil, panting, still full of energy, had stalked past Teddy's friends, wide-eyed witnesses, down the block to the rope swing, out of sight behind the oak, and had fallen himself minutes later, breaking both wrists. He had returned running and crying, holding both hands in front of him with his elbows next to his belly. When Teddy, waiting to be driven to the hospital, saw him, he'd managed to laugh, and Neil had gone through the car window after him. Teddy's friends had stood unable to move as they kicked, wrestled, pulled, and scratched, tumbling half in, half out of the car with one unbroken wrist between them. Their father separated them again.

"Imagine that," someone had said to Biddy on the way home. "Imagine how much it must've hurt to beat up his brother with two broken wrists?"

Later that day Biddy had helped his mother with the *macchina,* the macaroni machine. They were making homemades. Kristi sat at the kitchen table nearby, forming peanuts into rows. He was still shaken by the fight, and he guided the long macaroni strips like flat soft tongues away from the machine's rollers as his mother cranked. The machine was clamped to the table but still shifted and squeaked. As the pale ribbons would emerge Biddy would drape them, like diminutive scarves, over towels on the backs of chairs. His sister had assembled a row of peanuts fully a foot long, and had refused to tell either of them why.

His mother fed already thin strips expertly into the crack between the stainless-steel rollers with one hand, cranking rhythmically with the other. He lifted the thinner sheets as they emerged, palms supporting the cool, elastic weight. He could see Neil's flailing legs, the ferocity of the speed of the blows, Teddy's foot stomping wide of his brother's face. "Did kids fight a lot when you were a kid?" he asked his mother.

"As much as they do now, I guess," she answered. "Watch the end of that. It's going to bunch."

"Did you used to fight?" He carried a moist and pliant strip to a chair.

"I'm sure I was no brighter than anybody else. Aunt Sandy and I used to have real fights. She hit me on the head with a bottle once."

Biddy flinched. "Did it break?"

His mother laughed. "No. It was a Coke bottle. I had a huge bump, though."

He envisioned his mother on her rear with the bottle nearby, slightly stunned in the backyard of his grandmother's old home.

"Once I pushed her into the street, and she hit a fire hydrant, I think. We were about even, overall."

Biddy supported macaroni, palm crossing under palm to cradle the emerging piece. The image of his mother as having once been very much like his sister unnerved him, seemed to make the kitchen slightly unsteady beneath his feet. He felt separated, again.

"I don't get into many fights," he said, his words half confession, half offering.

"Well your sister does fine for both of you," his mother said, adjusting the rolling thickness.

Kristi swept her hands across the peanuts, one ticking loudly off the floor. "I'm just sitting here and even then you pick on me," she said.

Teddy was an altar boy on Biddy's team, and served with the broken wrist. He looked heroic, Biddy's mother said. Father Rubino referred to him now and then as the walking wounded. Teddy was bored with the whole thing and was planning to quit.

Every four weeks they were assigned seven-thirty Mass and Teddy came down with an ailment. This Sunday two others on the four-man team did as well. Biddy was left to go it alone, which he knew to be exceedingly difficult, even if the priest was extraordinarily patient and helped out. And Father Rubino was not extraordinarily patient and did not ever think to help out.

The Mass was always deserted. He counted eight people in the pews. He yawned, peeking out of the sacristy, fumbling with the cassock around his shoulders.

Father waited a full two minutes longer than usual before finally asking irritably if his friends were coming or what. Biddy couldn't say. He rubbed his eye and straightened his cassock. Father gestured him out and fell in step behind him at the sound of the organ, and he led the two-person procession embarrassed, half asleep, and beginning to wonder if he could handle everything on the altar alone. Father followed, muttering.

He performed erratically. He was late covering the chalice, slow with the wine and water, and forgot the bells during the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again, and Father turned to him and said piercingly, "The bells." Scattered among the pews eight people shifted and coughed.

During Communion, he let the plate drop and was told sharply to hold it up, at which point he jerked it into a sleepy woman's throat, causing her to gag.

He was giving the morning up for lost, thinking, This is nuts, when a girl appeared before him in the Communion line, her face smooth and wide and serious, her gaze startling. She looked at him as though the whole ungainly, tottering ceremony were running so smoothly that there was room for only reverence in one's perspective of it. He blinked and steadied the plate. She was wearing a white dress with blue trim and her hair was swept away from her face with perfect brushstrokes. She was beautiful. It surprised him, in that time and that place. In her solemnity she somehow began to redeem or confirm the idea of a seven-thirty Mass with one altar boy and eight people attending. He felt silly, foolishly theological, but she gazed directly at him as she received Communion, and he held the plate level.

He led the closing processional with little enthusiasm, dreading facing Father Rubino in the sacristy, wondering at his revelation with the girl. They were barely free of the tones of the organ when a woman poked her head in and asked for a moment of Father's time, leading the same girl with the beautiful hair and face. She was Mrs. Ransey; this was Laura. She was new in the diocese, in the neighborhood; she wanted all sorts of information, not the least of which was whether or not her Laura could attend Our Lady of Peace at this late date. Seventh grade. She knew it was late, but — Father cut her off: Yes, yes, fine, fine. Nice to see her. As for the school, she'd have to check with Sister Theresa: she ran everything over there. He didn't know what her policy on late entry was. Biddy continued to watch Laura as he poured back the excess wine and water, her attention wandering through the thicket of chalices and covering linens as the adults spoke.

"Sin," Sister Theresa said. It was first period Monday morning and Biddy was still looking at Laura, hovering quiet and serious beyond his catechism book.

"You're getting to be young adults," Sister said. "I've told you this before. Too big to be just memorizing catechism. 'Who is God?' 'God is good': you should be expected to do more than that now. You're old enough, you've been old enough, to start to take responsibility for your Christian lives. And that responsibility means having to deal with sin. Laura." Laura flushed, looking down. "What is sin?"

"Sin?" Laura said.

"Sin."

"Thirty-four," Biddy whispered, but her eyes remained away from the book.

"No coaching, Mr. Siebert."

"Sin is …" She waited, and Sister waited with her, more tolerant

with new students. “Sin is doing something wrong.”

“Is that all? Biddy?”

“Sin is knowingly doing something wrong?” Biddy said.

Sister sat back, for some reason unhappy with the answer. “Well, let’s take an example. Let’s say Teddy there broke his arm hitting his brother.”

“I broke it before then.”

“This is just an example.”

“And it’s my wrist.”

“Teddy. Would you like to stay after and go over all the blackboards? Keir. Suppose Teddy hit his brother and broke his own arm. Is that a sin?”

“Breaking his arm?”

“No, hitting his — Jimmy.”

“Yes.”

“It’s a sin?”

“Yes.”

“Why.”

“Because — you shouldn’t hit your brother.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll get in trouble.”

“Wrong.” Sister pounded the desk and everyone jumped. “Why is that wrong? Come on, let’s start to do some thinking here.” Laura looked over at Biddy, and he smiled.

“Jimmy. Suppose no one was around and you knew you wouldn’t get caught.”

“It’d still be wrong.”

“Okay. Why?”

“Because — you shouldn’t hit your fellow man.”

A few students snickered, and Sister sighed. “What about Jesus?” she said. “What does he have to do with all of this?”

“He’s in all of us,” Jimmy offered.

“So if we hit someone it’s like we’re hitting Jesus,” Keir said.

“That’s right.” Sister stood to emphasize the point. “Isn’t sin — any sin — always an offense against yourself and against someone else? So isn’t it always an offense against Jesus?”

Various students looked agreeable. No one spoke.

“This class is going to make progress,” Sister said. “In 1989.”

“Do you know Mr. Ransey?” Biddy asked. He and his father were sitting high up in the cheap seats at Shea Stadium, in the wind. They were freezing. The Jets were playing the Saints. They were Minnesota Viking fans.

“Who?” his father said, rubbing his thigh.

“Mr. Ransey. He lives on Spruce Street.”

“No. Should I?”

“No.”

In the distance the Jets ran wide and fumbled. The Saints leaped up and down, pointing downfield to indicate the change of possession.

“Can I get a gun?” Biddy said.

“A what?” His father looked at him.

“You know. A BB gun.”

“You don’t need a gun.” He returned his attention to the game.

“I was thinking about getting one.”

“Forget it. What’re you, Daniel Boone?” They fell silent, watching the Saints struggle upfield. “I take you to see a football game, and all you can think about is guns?”

The wind whipped through the Sunday crowd, lifting pieces of wrappers and program pages. Biddy had a scarf bundled loosely around his neck and he buried his chin in it. His hand played with the ticket stub deep in his jacket pocket.

The Jets’ green was not interesting or colorful against the turf, and the black-and-gold Saints looked dirty and tired. Much of the glamour of professional football seemed drained away in the lights reflecting yellow off the dirt and the flat dinginess of the players’ uniforms. It was late Sunday and they had driven over an hour for an interconference game between the New York Jets and the New Orleans Saints, and they shifted and huddled in their seats in the wind, watching the incoming jets cut through the growing darkness toward La Guardia.

The next Saturday, they sat inches from the bench straining to see over the heads of the players and coaches on the sidelines, watching the Stratford High North Paraders play Fairfield Prep, paying particular attention to senior defensive end Louis Liriano of the North Paraders, the first slightly retarded defensive end in Stratford’s history, as far as anyone knew. They sat next to Dom. Mickey, Ginnie, and Cindy were coming along later.

The solid red helmets bobbed in an extended line before him, and he could pick out Louis’s above the rest as the defense prepared to go back in.

“All right, let’s stuff ’em here,” Dom called.

Fairfield Prep wore black: simple, villainous, no frills. They were Stratford’s main league rivals. Both teams were undefeated.

This was one of Stratford’s best years ever, Dom was claiming as he watched the defense stream onto the field. No matter what happened, whether they won the MBIAC or not.

Louis wore number 89 and a full cage face mask. On the first

play, he pressured Prep's quarterback and forced him to throw the ball away, and Dom worried aloud that his son wasn't mean enough, that he was holding back when hitting people.

"That's all you need. Louis to grow up like Jack Tatum," Biddy's father said.

Dom shrugged. "It sounds awful, but that's the way the game is played. Give him a shot now and maybe the next time instead of thinking about coverages he's thinking about you. Or maybe he throws it a little sooner than he should."

They watched the Prep fullback trundle around the end for eighteen or twenty yards.

"He still gets fooled on those traps," Dom said. The officials moved the chains.

"The All-MBIAC team comes out this week, after the Milford game," Dom said, unzipping his jacket. The flap of one side was restless in the wind. "A lot depends on how he does here and against Milford. Most of the tube steaks who vote only pay attention to the big games."

Biddy's father mentioned that it was too bad. Dom brought up the Bullard-Havens game as an example, likening it to watching men against boys.

On the next snap, Louis got good penetration, sweeping around his man, but the play went the other way.

"He always loved football," Dom said. "I always said I'm not going to pressure this kid into anything. He wants to play, he'll play. Anyway, how could you pressure him?" Biddy's father smiled.

"He never quits. He's just a hell of a good kid." The three of them raised their hands to their mouths to warm them, a shortened chorus line. "Imagine if he makes All-MBIAC?"

Prep scored, the halfback leaping into the tangle of bodies at the goal line.

"Hey, Dom," a fat man said across the aisle. "What's wrong with Louis today? They're goin' right over him."

"What's wrong with you?" Dom said. "What game you watching?"

The first quarter ended with Prep ahead 7–0 and threatening again. Ginnie and Cindy threaded their way down the aisle. "What'd we miss? Anything?" Ginnie said.

Dom looked over the field sourly. "Where's Mickey?"

"He's coming. He's getting some ice cream. We miss anything?"

"Not a goddamned thing."

Cindy turned to Biddy. "We behind?"

He nodded. "Seven nothing."

"Oh, that's not too bad. Dad, you make it sound like it's fifty-seven to seven."

"Yeah, I'm terrible. Seven looks like a lot to me right now."

"We'll get it back."

"I just hope he doesn't get hurt," Ginnie said.

"What else is new?" Dom said. "Come on, defense." Prep continued to drive, and he sat down. "He's not stopping the sweep on his side," he said to no one in particular. "They're moving him out and going right over him."

"They're running on the whole side, not just Louis," Biddy's father said.

"Bullshit. He's the defensive end on that side. And right now he's invisible out there."

"He'll adjust," Cindy said. "They'll adjust."

"Yeah. Well one more touchdown and we won't have to worry about it."

Prep set up near the Stratford goal line. "You gotta get the uniform dirty," Dom said. "They have to be more aggressive. He has to be more aggressive. He's gotta start throwing himself at people out there." He looked around. "Where the hell is Mickey? I thought he was just getting an ice cream."

"He was," Ginnie said. "Maybe he found some friends."

"Come on, Louis!" Cindy yelled. Louis waved. Prep, all in black, came out of their huddle. Biddy craned his neck to see, felt himself digging in with Louis, mentally trying to push Prep back.

At the snap the defense rose up on Louis's side and threw back the sweep and the crowd roared and shook the bleachers. A second-down pass failed, and on the third down the runner was chased out of bounds.

"Hit 'em again! Hit 'em again! Harder! Harder!" the bleachers began to chant, Biddy's row picking it up. The chant had been growing in strength with each successive down, and he began to feel a part of that unity of spectators and players that was halting and mastering Fairfield Prep, and he shouted, "Defense, defense," with the others, the air cool on his throat and their voices mixing and filling the air above the red line of defenders on the field. They leaped together, Cindy hugging him and Dom hugging them both when the red of the North Paraders overwhelmed Prep, the fullback slipping and stumbling on fourth down under a wave of bodies with houses and telephone wires rising beyond them, in the second quarter of an MBIAC high-school football game in Stratford, Connecticut.

The next Monday, he played kids from Bridgeport on the bluffs near the beach. Ronnie Pierce was the only spectator, having pulled his car onto the grass to watch. The game was rough and quickly grew mean; no one knew anyone on the opposite side or intended to lose

under those circumstances. Mickey had the sweat shirt torn from his back; a kid from Bridgeport had his nose bloodied. They decided to call a halftime at five touchdowns, and when they did Bridgeport was ahead five to two.

Ronnie left his car and walked over. “Bad guys look tough today,” he said.

“That one kid’s fast,” Biddy panted.

“Those sweeps’re killing you, all right. That was some shot you took at the end there.”

“I’m okay.”

Ronnie sat and zipped up his jacket, and Biddy took off a sneaker and began to relace it. The wind was cold on his sweaty foot.

“You guys are gonna have to force that play.”

Biddy nodded. Ronnie retied his sneaker as well, a mirror image. “How come you’re not working today?” Biddy said. He had the uneasy feeling that Ronnie knew him very well and lacked the interest to pursue any insight he might possess further.

“I took the day off. Spring fever.”

“Now?”

Ronnie shrugged. “Fall fever.” He grinned, and Biddy grinned back.

“Where’s Cindy?”

He shrugged again. “I don’t know. Work, right?”

Biddy kept lacing. “You have to do a lot of stuff to get ready for the wedding?”

Ronnie sucked at a tooth with his tongue. “A lot of stuff has to be done. Doesn’t mean I have to do it.”

“You’re not going to help?”

“Hey, you know how long it took just to find a hall? Three weeks. Three weeks for the hall. You’re talking about serious hours here when you put everything together.”

Someone from Bridgeport punted the ball off the side of his foot into the thickets and dune grass below the bluffs.

“Do you think about getting married a lot?” Biddy asked.

“On and off,” Ronnie said. “Not much.”

They gazed out over the water beyond the bluffs, gray and whitecapped. The wind was running parallel to the shore. He had the nagging sense of being like Ronnie in some fundamental, elusive way.

“Your mother says I don’t think about it enough.”

“My mother?”

“We had a talk about it one day. I think the worry is I’m not good enough. Or I’m not going to treat Cindy good enough.”

Biddy looked at the grass guiltily.

“And she worries about other things,” Ronnie said.

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's all grown-up stuff. You wouldn't be interested."

"About Cindy?"

"No, other things. Your mother worries I don't grapple with the larger problems," he said. "I think Ginnie and Dom do, too." He smiled. The Bridgeport kid struggled back up the steep side of the bluffs with the ball. "I told her I don't grapple with anything I can't take the top off of." Biddy stood as the teams reformed. Ronnie smiled, and seemed younger to him suddenly. "That didn't go over so big. Anyway, go get 'em. And don't let that kid turn the corner on you."

But they couldn't stop the kid outside and still adequately cover the middle. They continued to get pounded. He was acutely aware of Ronnie. He fumbled. He was run over and faked to his knees. He fumbled again the next time he touched the ball, and, outraged at his performance, he raced up and threw himself at the blockers and runner on the first play afterward.

"Take it easy," Ronnie called. "This isn't the Super Bowl."

On the next play, he threw himself forward again, driving in low and turning away from the oncoming legs that kicked and trampled. Two or three people went down, but not the runner, who leaped the tangle and kept going.

"Too aggressive," Ronnie called. "Keep your head up. Don't commit yourself too soon."

"Who is that guy?" one of the Bridgeport kids said. "You got your own coach?"

Some kids laughed and he hunched over, bruised, panting, waiting for the snap. He couldn't stop this kid, they were playing up to 10, the score was already 7–2.

They were on the road at night, jostling back and forth with the bumps, coming home from visiting. His mother's sister lived in Norwich and the ride was not a short one. They went rarely because of it. He was slumped against his mother in the front seat, gazing into the darkness as they descended from the highway exit to the lonely road through the meadows and flooded salt marsh that connected Lordship to Bridgeport. Officially it was Lordship Boulevard, a two-and-a-half-mile blacktop outlined in low wooden guardrails which meandered through the swamp, skirting bays and tidal wetlands. Biddy's father called it the Burma Road.

Kristi was taking up the entire back seat; she'd been sick the last few days and it was hoped she'd sleep on the way home. His father was driving badly. His mother was angry.

There were no lights on the road; the darkness was complete except for the tiny points of the houses ahead and the multicolored lights of the airport to the left. On the curves the car's headlights flashed stands of cattails fading from yellow to deep brown in the glare, and white speed-limit signs surfaced from the black and swept by.

Curves were handled loosely, gradual turns corrected by jerks that made his shoulders quiver. His mother, looking out her window toward the sea, finally said something sharp and his father seemed to settle down.

His father had been angry since late afternoon; when they had been leaving Lordship, he had said, "Get in, get in, get in," holding the car door open. "Your mother isn't happy unless we're on the move." To which his mother had replied, "Your father isn't happy unless he's sitting on his ass."

They continued around curves in the dark, Lordship's lights growing larger. The grace of the movement of lights across the windshield gave him the pleasant sensation of being part of a dance.

"*Just what makes that little old ant*," his father sang in a soft voice. "*Think'll he'll move that rubber tree plant*."

His mother sighed.

"*Anyone knows an ant, can't, move a rubber tree plant. But he's got — high hopes*." He patted Biddy's thigh in time to his singing. "*He's got — high hopes*."

"Kristi's sleeping," his mother said.

His father's voice dropped in volume. "*He's got high apple pie in the sky hopes. So any time you're gettin' low, 'stead of lettin' go, just remember that ant: whoops, there goes another rubber tree plant, there goes another rubber tree plant*." His voice trailed off.

"Wanna take the wheel?" he finally said, and Biddy looked at him closely and realized with a start that he might be drunk. He looked hot and lazy. His hat was perfectly straight and there were beads of sweat under his sideburns. He was leaning back against the seat and had one finger hooked over the bottom of the steering wheel.

"Walt."

"Yeah, yeah. C'mon, take the wheel. Don't reach over. Get on my lap." Biddy had never touched the wheel of their car while it was moving and had never wanted to, but he climbed onto his father's lap.

"Walt."

"Got it?"

"Walt. Biddy, leave the wheel alone."

"I'm lettin' go," his father said.

The car sailed in a sickening diagonal across the road before big hands around his righted the wheel with a jerk. "Take it," his father

said.

He held on, feeling awesomely responsible for all of this, wanting his father to take the wheel back. In the distance he saw lights turn onto the road.

"Dad. There's a car coming."

"You're fine."

"Dad."

"Walt."

"You're all right."

The car came on them quickly and he seemed too far to the right, too close to the wood and cable of the guardrails, and he tried to compensate and the lights blinded him, his mother's cry filling the car, and she grabbed the wheel just as his father did, and suddenly they were jerking to a stop, his father laughing, his mother leaning across him, her hands still on the wheel.

"You asshole," she hissed, and he could see the dashboard light in her eyes, reflecting in small points off her lipstick.

That night in bed at Three Rivers Stadium he came out of a huddle next to Bobby Bryant and Matt Blair, turning to face the Pittsburgh Steelers. Strip the interference, Blair told him as he drifted into position. If they come wide to your side, you're gonna have to strip the interference. Don't think you can stop the sweep by just waving at them as they go by. The crowd noise resounded on the artificial turf, and TV cameramen hustled along the sidelines. He waited, opposite John Stallworth. The Steelers were in deep black and yellow, and the lights reflected in bright white circles off the gloss of Stallworth's helmet. It was a Monday night in Three Rivers Stadium with the whole world watching, and he was trying desperately to hold up his end of the Minnesota Viking defense. The white horns of his teammates' helmets angled in unison as they bobbed close to the line of scrimmage, waiting. Bradshaw was shouting signals over the crowd noise.

At the snap there was an explosion of speed and power and he watched the play develop for too long, picking up Stallworth only as the Steeler receiver lashed into him, driving him onto his back so that his helmet bounced on the artificial turf and the condenser microphones on the sidelines could pick it up. He was aware of his father somewhere in the crowd.

Blair stood over him, eyes looming out of the white cage and purple helmet. Man, you're gonna have to deal with that, he said. Stallworth's gonna be comin' at you and you just gotta beat him to the guard or whoever's leading the play. He pulled, lifting Biddy off the cold artificial surface, and in the defensive huddle Biddy felt as he had

in the Oriole dugout: he wasn't doing the job and they were going to get rid of him. Or worse, as he left the huddle and hunched opposite Stallworth once more: he was letting everyone down until they did.

While he diagnosed the next play, Stallworth moved like light and drove his shoulder and helmet into Biddy's thigh, pinwheeling him around and knocking him out of the runner's path. He lay on his side, arm pinned at an odd angle, watching Franco Harris score.

Oh, man, Blair said from behind him. You are just not willing to do what it takes, are you?

Every day for a week he sat next to Laura at recess. She sat alone during the free time the nuns allowed after organized games.

Her father was a doctor and she used to live in Toledo, Ohio. She didn't like Connecticut so far, but they were going to visit Mystic soon, her father said.

"You know what's at Mystic?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Boats?"

They sat under a smallish tree at the edge of the playground. She raised the plaid of her skirt and nudged a beetle off her thigh. "The nuns are nicer here," she said, watching Sister Theresa.

"Some are nice," he said.

"They don't hit you so much."

Kristi flopped down next to them. "It's hot out there," she announced. "You guys got all the shade." She studied a kickball game across the yard before turning to Laura and squinting. "Who're you?"

"This is Laura," Biddy said.

Kristi peered at her. "Do you have a sister in the first grade?"

"No." Laura said.

"Are you an orphan?"

Laura looked up, wide-eyed. "No."

"Look like an orphan."

"Kristi," Biddy warned.

"You're not very nice," Laura said.

"Well, you're an assface."

"Kristi get out of here," he said. "Go sit under your own tree."

She stood and left. "Assface," she called over her shoulder.

Laura squinted after her.

"My sister's creepy sometimes," he said. "Sorry."

"It's okay." She started to cry. She said, "I don't know anyone here."

"It's okay," he said meaninglessly, surprised. "You know me. You'll know other people." She stared moodily at the tree, a lone hair lifting from her head in the breeze. "I don't know many people either," he offered. "And I've been here my whole life."

She didn't cheer up. He looked off in the direction she was looking.

Sister Theresa was approaching, gesturing for them to assemble with the others. She had a small oval of blood inside her nose, dark in the shadow of her nostril.

"What happened to Sister?" Laura breathed as Sister came closer.

"Probably picked it too hard," he said, and she laughed, startling him. Sister stopped, equally surprised, and dabbed her nose with a handkerchief and noticed the blood. She looked up at them and walked over. She waited.

"My bloody nose is funny, Laura?" she said. "Is it funny?"

They didn't speak.

"That's very nice. You see someone bleeding and you laugh." She paused. "I think you should stay after with me today, young lady."

"No," he said. "That's not fair. She wasn't laughing at you. She was laughing at something I said."

"Oh?" Sister held the handkerchief back up to her nose. "And what was that, Jack Benny?"

He looked away, sullen.

"What'd you say?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Was it that terrible?" She dabbed again. "You might as well tell me. You're staying after as well." She gestured toward the school. "You've held up the whole recess line now. Not brave enough to tell me?"

"I said you must have picked it too hard," he said.

She slapped him across the face.

Laura drew in her breath sharply, and his eyes filled with water. Sister stood them both up and followed them back to the recess line.

They stayed in separate rooms after school and Laura was released a half hour before he was. He wasn't allowed to leave his seat. He spent some time in Three Rivers Stadium but couldn't find the will to stay and was beginning to derive less from it in any event.

On his way home he thought, I could write a note.

Dear Mom and Dad.

I'm all right. It's real nice here and everybody's nice to me. I'm learning how to do all sorts of things. I found a new dog and he's really good. I'm eating a lot. I'm sorry I left. Today we went for a hike and saw farms and mountains. Today we went swimming. Today we went skiing.

Where was he going to go, he thought. How was he going to go anywhere? He didn't know where to go, didn't have any money, and didn't know anyone. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to go.

I don't know anything, he thought, and threw his lunch box into his yard as he came down the street.

"Kristi," he called up the stairs as he climbed. "Don't do that again." The bannister slipped and whistled under his palm.

"What are you fighting about?" his mother called. "Stop it."

He called her again, and went into her bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

"Shh," she said.

"What're you doing?"

"I'm watchin' Mr. Fraser back the car out."

He went to the window. "What for?"

"He's runnin' over his rake."

"His rake? Where?"

"There." She pointed at the long, thin-handled rake, prongs up, lying in the driveway.

"Why don't you tell him?"

She looked at him. "I want to see if he sees it."

They both watched, charmed into silence as Mr. Fraser edged the car out slowly, looking farther down the driveway. The bumper crept nearer so incrementally that the scene began to resemble something from an inept thriller. The prongs disappeared under the car's shadow.

Fraser stopped and got out of the car, checking behind it, and pulled the rake out of the way.

Kristi turned from the window. "I'm thirsty."

"Kristi, don't act like that with Laura anymore."

"You like her."

He stared at her. "What do you care?"

"I don't have to like her just because you do."

"You don't have to like her. Just don't be mean to her. Don't be so mean to anyone."

She sat on the bed, bored. "Can we get a cat since Lady's dead?" she said.

"Shut up." He looked at her blue eyes, her nose. "We don't need a cat. And you'd just treat it awful anyway."

"Well I wouldn't kill it."

They could hear noises outside. She rummaged in a drawer for a sweater, seemingly realizing she might have gone too far.

"Why are you so mean to everybody?" he asked, in almost a whisper. He very much wanted to know.

"I'm not. Leave me alone." She found a bright red sweater and pulled it over her hair.

He felt sad, beaten in some way. He said, "Put on a jacket if you're going out." I sound like them, he thought.

"Leave me alone." She went to the stairs. "And get outta my room."

"He's always in my room," he heard her complain to his mother as she passed through the kitchen.

On the stairs later that evening, he heard his father and mother discussing him. "Well, we gotta do something," his father said.

He couldn't hear his mother's response.

"Well, Jesus Christ, he walks around with his face down to here. Everything is 'I don't care' or 'I don't feel like it,' and he's got no interest in anything anymore. Now all I have to hear is that his grades are suffering."

His mother said something.

"Well, I got Al Greaves looking for me, for a dog. Something small, you know, and it won't cost us anything, and I'll make sure it's not something that's gonna take your hand off."

"You think it's that simple?" His mother was closer now.

"What do you want me to do? Hire a psychiatrist? Bring in a team from Yale?"

"He's unhappy about more than the dog and you know it."

"Well, let's start small, all right? We'll surprise him with the dog, and if he ends up strangling it then we'll know what our next move should be."

Dishes collided and rattled.

"Look, I'm not saying—" His father moved away, fading out under the clatter.

He thought for a while about a dog. The image of Lady as a puppy returned to him. "Lady the second," he said, standing and turning in to his bedroom. "I'll probably kill her, too."

The Lirianos came over. He avoided Mickey and went outside and sat next to Louis, who was sitting alone at the redwood table as though it were summer.

"Button your jacket, Louis," he suggested.

"Thanks." He buttoned his jacket. His voice always seemed to have an odd extra bit of volume.

"That was a great game last week," Biddy said.

"Thanks."

"Now all you gotta do is beat Milford."

"Uh-huh."

A leaf fell directly between them, resting on curved points on the table. "How come you're out here?"

Louis shrugged. "I'm tired. Came from practice." He pulled up some grass and twiddled it between his fingers. Biddy felt sadder than

ever.

"You know," Louis said, startling him, "we hate Prep." There was a silence, and Biddy waited for him to continue. "They do terrible things. Last year in pileups they were pulling the hairs out of my legs."

Biddy sat forward. "The hairs out of your legs?"

He nodded sadly. "You couldn't see who was doing it, and everyone on top would hold you down." There was an odd, rumbling sound from the airport. "It used to hurt," he added.

"I believe it," Biddy said.

"Darien was mean, too. They used to come in three buses. It was like an army, Coach said."

"How were they mean?"

He shook his head vaguely. The tree branches above him moved in the wind, clacking like dice in a cup.

"How have you been, Louis?" he asked after a while.

"I'm okay. I hurt my hand in the game." He looked at his hand.

"No, I mean have you been happy and stuff?"

"Yeah. I been happy." He sounded flat.

"You sound blah."

He nodded, undisturbed. "People say that."

Biddy leaned forward. "Louis, do you ever see yourself doing other things? Playing in other games? Like pro football?"

"Oh, I'm not good enough for pro football."

"No, I mean imagine — like pretend you're in a game. Or dream?"

"Sometimes I have dreams."

Biddy slumped back.

"Is that what you mean?"

"No, not really." A private plane droned by, banking around to its approach pattern. "What's your favorite team?"

"Football?" Louis said. "Browns."

"Okay, do you ever, like imagine you're playing with the Browns?"

Louis looked at him strangely. "Why would I do that?"

"I don't know," Biddy said, discouraged. "I thought you might."

"You should button your jacket," Louis said, scolding.

Biddy nodded, feeling the cold. "I know," he said. "Thanks."

Laura wasn't in school the next day. He sat under the tree anyway, by himself. Sister Theresa walked over and sat next to him.

"Going to play today?" she asked.

"No."

Across the yard, the ball was kicked back and forth.

"I'm noticing a real change in attitude with you, Biddy," she said. "What do you think?" She looked at him. "Feel any different?" She returned her attention to the game, her profile sharp and striking. "Like what happened yesterday. That surprised me. I wouldn't've expected it of you. I shouldn't have lost my temper like that, but even so. Is anything bothering you you'd like to talk about?"

"No," he said.

"You could talk to Father if you'd be more comfortable."

"No."

"What about your grades?"

He gazed at the grass.

"They're not what anyone expects of you. You're just getting by this year. And letting a lot of people down. A lot of it is carelessness. As you know."

He rubbed a hand on his shoe.

"Is the work too hard? It's not too hard for Janet. It's not too hard for Sarah Alice. Laura was just dropped into a strange situation and she's doing fine. Do you think you're going to get honors every year for slapdash work?" She waited. "What are your parents going to say after this report card?"

"I don't know," he said.

"You don't know. You should know. Should I arrange a meeting with them? Do we need a meeting with them?"

"No."

"Straighten up, Biddy. You're a bright boy and you stay out of trouble. You've got a good future ahead if you work at it." She stood, checking the back of her habit for grass. "I'm still assuming you'll represent Our Lady of Peace in the spelling bee. With Sarah Alice and Janet."

He nodded.

"It's an honor, by the way," she called back over her shoulder. "Let's go. We're going in now." She gestured at the line of boys and girls in plaid and gray, fidgeting and jostling one another under the cool overcast sky.

He took the pitch and sprinted wide, turning, twisting, darting, ripping away from people, making grunting, desperate noises in the exertion. He was upended finally and fumbled, landing on his shoulder. Someone tore his sleeve off.

Bridgeport had returned for a rematch, and Biddy and the rest of Lordship were now back on defense.

The fast kid was back, as well. He was wearing a shirt that said HELLO on the front. When he'd arrived Teddy had asked "What does that mean?" And he'd turned around to reveal a GOODBYE on the

back.

"Give it to me wide," the fast kid said audibly in the huddle. "These kids suck."

They threw themselves at him when he took the pitch; threw themselves, arms and legs splayed out, hoping to hurt him, hoping to stop him, hoping at least to force him out of bounds. In the confusion and tangle of bodies they did.

"Asshole," he said, to no one in particular.

The next time, he drove into them and kept going; the time after, he went around.

Teddy stood up, brown grass hanging from his ear. "We're gonna stop that kid and that play if it takes all night," he said.

Biddy sat panting on the ground, legs out, nearly heaving. He'd been kicked in the chest.

Blair knelt over him. C'mon, man, he said. Let's go.

He looked up in wonder at the black face under the brilliant purple helmet. The lights around the stadium were utterly dazzling and he was blinded if he took his eyes from him.

You can't sit here, Blair said. There's a football game goin' on.

And Biddy slowly got off the artificial surface, checking himself, straightening his face mask, shifting a pad. His hands were taped. He had purple wristbands. Brilliant purple and yellow stripes ran down the outsides of his thighs. His ears filled with people roaring his name, and the names of his teammates.

Let's go, Blair said, hustling back to his position, and the snap caught him unprepared as Stallworth came after him, and he fought him off and caught a glimpse of Franco Harris surging toward him, and he shucked Stallworth to see Harris's onrushing helmet lowering, his eyes closing and his face screwing up in anticipation of the impact, and Biddy drove into him and hung on, the fast kid jarring backward and twisting to get free, Teddy leaping on as the kid spun and fell.

"Your nose is bleeding," the kid said as he lined up and then went into his stance as Franco Harris, roaring forward toward Biddy like a black-and-yellow refrigerator coming down a flight of stairs, and Biddy cut and ducked in toward his knees, lowering a shoulder, and was knocked out of the way. He chased and dived, leaped and grabbed, sprinted and dug in, and sprawled, and when it was over he was left in the dried grass in the middle of the bluffs, holding his arm, staring into the gloom, grass in his hair, dried blood on his face, one sleeve missing, and both the fast kid and Franco Harris gone.

"You know, you really are crazy," Teddy said, hunched next to him. "You know that?"

"I know it," Biddy said. "Now all I gotta do is do something about it."

Punting

Biddy is a wonderful boy. Kristi has her moments, too. I'm not going to pretend we've had nothing but trouble from them, because we haven't. I'm not trying to make us into martyrs. God knows we don't qualify. It's just that most of the time people seem to wonder what I'm worrying about. What's wrong with Judy? Why can't she leave well enough alone?

What am I supposed to tell them? How long do you have to be around Biddy to know there's something wrong, there's something he's keeping inside of him? How long can you ignore what Kristi does or write her off as still too young to know what she's doing?

My husband doesn't agree. We're fine, the kids are fine, and we don't need to talk to anybody about anybody. It's not surprising, really: if we don't talk to each other, why should he be willing to talk to strangers?

Whether it's the kids' behavior or a new addition, I'm always pushing, he says. Always after something. Never satisfied. He says the kids learned how to sulk watching me. And what seems so awful, especially when I know the kids are hurting and we're not helping them, is that every so often I think he may be right.

"My story's called 'The Girl Who Interrups,'" Kristi said. "You wanta hear it?"

Biddy looked from the TV to the rain outside. "Sure."

"You can't and watch TV at the same time."

"Yes, I can. Go ahead."

Kristi turned on the overhead light. "'In my class I have a girl named Interruping Libby. She always interrups reading groups.'"

"How did you spell 'interrupts'?"

"I-n-t-e-r-r-u-p-s."

"That's wrong. There's a 't' at the end, too: p-t-s."

"'Sometimes she even interrupts our silent period. I really do not like her. When my teacher is talking she says I want to talk to you so talk to me and not to her. Interrupting Libby always interrupts. People do not do that to her. My mother got fed up with her and sent my father to see her. He said she better stop that people are going to start hitting her in the mouth. So she didn't interrupt anymore.'"

"You made that last part up," he said.

"You like it?"

"It's better than your other one."

"I like it."

The back door opened. "*From the beat, beat, beat, of the tomtoms*," his father sang. Biddy and Kristi went into the kitchen. Their father was dripping with rain, setting packages along the counter in a row.

“Did a little shopping,” he said. “Got a little liquor, got a little mixer, got some rolls. You want a sandwich?”

Biddy said no and Kristi returned to the TV.

“Oh, and got a little this.” He handed a package to Biddy, who felt immediately the heft and shape of a big book.

“What is it?” he said.

His father shrugged. “Have to open it.”

He tore at the wrapping, and underneath it said in big red letters *The Lore of Flight.*

“God,” he said. “How’d you know I wanted it?”

“Well, you asked me questions about Bill Carver’s plane until I thought I’d drop. This’s got all that stuff in there.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“Never mind where I got it.” He opened it. “See? It’s got ‘Flying a Small Aircraft,’ ‘A Typical Flight,’ a section on weapons. … It’s interesting stuff.”

Biddy closed it.

“It’s a good book,” his father said. “It’s not cheap.”

“I didn’t think so.”

His father smiled and went into the bedroom to hang up his jacket.

“What’re you doing home?” Biddy called.

“I just took off a little early. I’ll work on the cellar. You guys turned it into a real shithouse.”

“What’d you get me?” Kristi called from the den.

“Oh, Jesus.” His father came out of the bedroom and started down the cellar stairs.

“Biddy gets everything.”

“It was a book sale,” he called, his voice ringing hollow under the floor. “You want a book? You don’t read the ones you got now.”

“I want a cat,” she said.

“We’re not getting a cat.” There was the scraping sound of boxes being moved across concrete. “We can’t even take care of ourselves.”

Biddy went into the den. His sister put both feet under a hassock from her perch on a chair and kicked upward violently, flipping it across the room and off the wall.

“Jesus Christ!” his father yelled from below. “What’re you doing now?”

No one said anything. There was an angry white mark on the paneling where the leg of the hassock had hit.

“What happened?”

“Nothing,” Kristi called. “The hassock fell over.” She looked back at the TV. “It falls over all the time.”

Ronnie and Cindy sat opposite each other at the Lirianos' kitchen table. There was a fruit dish with three pears between them. Biddy was waiting for Mickey, who couldn't find his shoes. Ronnie was drinking anisette.

"How about this," Ronnie said. "'Fair trial? Whaddaya mean, fair trial? If I get a fair trial, I'm dead. What I need is an unfair trial.'"

"Oh," Cindy said. "I know it's George Raft, but I don't know which movie."

Ronnie swirled his anisette. It left a clear film on the glass.

"I don't know," she finally said.

"That's two in a row. Go ahead."

"Well, what movie was it from?"

He wouldn't tell her. "All right," she said. "'Dignity. Always dignity.'"

"Gene Kelly. *Singin' in the Rain*."

She made a face.

"'When you side with a man, you stick with him. Otherwise you're no better than some animal.'"

She played with a spoon. "I should know this," she said.

"You should. William Holden in *The Wild Bunch."*

"How do you play this?" Biddy asked.

"Badly." Cindy swept some hair behind her ear.

"We're trying to stump each other a certain amount of times," Ronnie said.

"'She just goes a little mad sometimes. We all go a little mad sometimes,'" Cindy said. "'Haven't you?'"

Biddy lifted a salt shaker. "Who said that?" he asked.

"Poor Norman." Ronnie sat forward. "Anthony Perkins in *Psycho*."

"Rats," Cindy said.

"Might as well run up the white flag," Ronnie suggested. "I think you're in over your head here."

"Over my head. Listen to this nine-inch worm."

"Nine-inch worm?" Biddy said.

"It's a joke," Ronnie said. "A filthy joke, I might add. Ms. Liriano here apparently designed and built the sewers of Paris."

Biddy sat back, lost.

"What do you think, Biddy?" she said. "Why am I marrying this yim-yam? Do I have a soft spot in my heart for strays?"

"The soft spot's in your head," Ronnie said.

"Our first fight," she said. She leaned closer to Biddy, conspiratorial. "Isn't he a homely sucker, Biddy? Look at the face. Looks like a fist with eyes."

Ronnie laughed.

"You'd better watch yourself," she said. "I might come to my

senses."

"I'm worried," he said. He picked at a tooth. "Start something on the side with Biddy here."

Biddy shifted his weight in the chair, wondering where Mickey could possibly be. He said he'd see what was keeping him, and got out of the kitchen and took the stairs two at a time.

Mickey was rummaging through his toy box.

"Are you coming out?" Biddy said.

"I don't feel like it." He didn't look up.

"Why not?"

"I don't feel like it." He looked at him. "Who asked you to come over anyway? Why don't you go home or move away or something?" Biddy stood flatfooted, stunned. Mickey threw another toy in the box. "Jerk."

Page 279 of *The Lore of Flight,* "Flying a Small Aircraft":

In these days of swing-wing supersonics, jumbo jets and airline passengers by the millions, it is not generally realized that the great majority of aircraft are small and simple machines. For example, there are over 100,000 privately owned small aeroplanes in the United States, where they outnumber airliners about a hundred to one.

He was taken back to the day he and Louis were caught by the yellow jeep near the runway: they had crept to the very edge of the reeds, lying on their bellies, the crushed straw warmer than the ground underneath, and had watched the private planes turn and wait for clearance, running the engines up, before accelerating down the tarmac away from them and lifting free into the air in the distance.

They watched five aircraft go off like that in succession, plane after plane revving, vibrating, gathering power, it seemed, before the final release. Each one in succession turning to show its colors, broad stripes of red and blue and green, each one spellbinding him in turn, seducing him further from the reeds, blinding him until too late to the approach of the yellow security jeep in the periphery of his vision.

He compared *The Lore of Flight* to an old Cessna manual Mr. Carver had given him after the flight to East Hampton. He reread "Flying a Small Aircraft," comprehending bit by bit throttles, rudder bars, angles of attack, trim, and drag. He read about the tendency to yaw, and about stalling. He studied the Cessna specifications and the preflight checklist, reproduced in full. At the end of the chapter, in a red Magic Marker box, he outlined and highlighted:

Most of the time, the task of flying a light aeroplane is easier than driving a car, less strenuous than riding a horse, and requires less skill than fishing for trout.

And a final sentence, next to which he soberly drew a thick,

double line:

It does, however, require constant alertness, and any lapses of concentration can be serious.

He sat alone watching Louis and some other members of the team horse around in the wide, empty practice field. He'd come to watch the practice and had stayed despite learning it had been canceled, unhappy with the idea of returning so soon after arriving. He had come on the bus, and had sat next to a black couple who had argued all the way out. The woman had been holding the man's cassette deck while he tucked in his shirt, and he'd said, "Shit, you ain't nothing but a nickel-diving bitch anyway," and she'd hit him so hard with the cassette deck that the batteries had fallen out. The image and sudden violence had stayed in his head and he considered it from his perch on the dark green bleachers.

While most of the team had left, some had stayed around, waiting for rides and making fun of each other's girlfriends. They started a pickup game of touch out of boredom and moved away from where he was sitting, but he didn't follow, content to watch from where he was. An odd boy about his age, his hair sticking out at spiky angles, came up and sat near him.

In the game across the field, Louis tumbled backward over a pileup with his legs spread, someone else landing on top of him. When he got up, something shook between his legs and Biddy leaned forward.

"That kid's pecker is hangin' out," the boy next to him said.

Louis had split his pants up the leg and was wearing nothing underneath.

No one he was playing with told him. The game continued. Whenever he ran it hung out, jiggling around. Tacklers made an elaborate display of getting out of the way.

Finally, with everyone stricken with laughter, someone pointed it out to Louis, who looked down and clapped both hands over his crotch, causing the laughter to intensify. They followed him to the bleachers and sat below Biddy.

"Nice secret weapon, Louis," one of them said.

"Here I'm tackling the guy and I'm face to face with his nine-inch worm."

Biddy reddened, Cindy's phrase defining itself. Louis was smiling sheepishly.

"He's tryin' to distract you out there, Moretti."

"He's gotta do better than that."

"Why? Not your size?"

"It's your mother's size."

They kept after each other, everyone pitching in except Louis, who grinned and kept both hands on his crotch. The talk turned to girlfriends.

"Nice chick, Moretti. What an operator. He gets her drunk and she throws up in the back of his car."

"Your mother threw up in the back of my car."

"And then he gets so pissed he leaves her there and comes back to the party. Class act."

"Maybe you oughta give up girls."

"Or find somebody younger."

"What was this one, junior high?"

"Maybe you should give up girls," Louis said, rocking forward into the conversation.

"Shut up, Louis," Moretti said. "You can't even keep your dick in your pants."

Louis sat back and his grin disappeared. When they left, he stayed and Biddy went down and sat next to him.

The field was deserted now except for the boy with the spiky hair, running patterns for an imaginary pass. Biddy put his hand on Louis's back. "He wasn't that mad," he said. "He was just ranking you."

Louis looked at his hands on his crotch.

"I don't think he expected you to make fun of him."

"I shouldn't've said anything," Louis said. The spiky kid loped into the end zone, hands cradling an invisible ball. "I make everybody do that."

"No you don't."

"C'mon." Louis got up. "Let's go home."

All the way home Biddy tried to cheer him up, talking about odd, unrelated subjects in bursts and giving up and surrendering to the silence for ten to fifteen minutes at a time before trying again.

When they reached his house, Louis turned and said he'd see him later and disappeared, leaving Biddy to walk the last few blocks alone and unhappy with everything.

Up in his room he opened all the drawers of his desk for no reason and stood before them, gazing at the mess.

His father came softly up the stairs and stood behind him. "What're you doing?" he said.

"Nothing," Biddy said.

"Where'd you go?"

"To watch Louis practice."

His father crossed to the window and shut it. "That's nice. It's November and you got the windows open. When your mother sees the oil bill she'll scream."

Biddy stood in front of the open desk, unenthusiastic about doing anything else.

"Why's Mickey mad at you? Dom says he pretty much threw you out of the house the other day."

"I don't know."

"Well, I wouldn't let it bother you. He's a little off the wall for extra bases, that kid."

Biddy took his jacket off.

"What's on the agenda now? A little dice baseball?"

He shrugged and his father came over to the desk alongside him. "Get a load of this." He reached into the drawer and pulled out a sheaf of box scores. "How many games do you play? Baltimore-Oakland, Baltimore-Oakland, Baltimore-New York … What is this, a whole season?"

"A whole season," Biddy said.

"Jesus Christ. If you'd been reading all this time, you'd be a Ph.D." He sat on the bed, leafing through the pile. "What are these K's? Strikeouts?" Biddy nodded. "And what does this mean?"

He looked over. "Out stealing third."

"Well, I gotta hand it to you, guy. Biddy Siebert and his magic violin. Some imagination. Look at this: batting averages, half-year statistical leaders — is there anything you don't have in here? When you want to, you can make things up with the best of them. But listen: think maybe we can cut back the number of games eventually, Commissioner?"

"I'm not playing now."

"No, I mean when the season starts."

"It doesn't bother anybody."

"It bothers me. Jesus Christ, there's a thousand things you could be doing in the summer and you're up here throwing Doug DeCinces out at second base."

Biddy looked down.

"C'mon. This next year let's give it a rest, okay? I bought you the book about airplanes. Learn about airplanes. Or find another interest. At least cut back on this stuff. Otherwise I'll flush every pair of dice in the house."

"Okay."

"Anyway, the reason I came up here was to tell you I got a surprise for you. So keep tomorrow after supper free."

"Okay."

His father made a face and sat farther back on the bed, dissatisfied.

Biddy sat at the desk and put the box scores away. He sharpened a pencil.

"How do you like that book?" his father said.

"I like it a lot."

"You sound like it." He lay back with a noisy intake of breath and looked up at the ceiling. "Gettin' old." He remained in that position for some few minutes, annoying Biddy for some reason, and finally said, "You seen Ronnie lately?"

"No. Why?"

"No reason. He's just never around. Poor Cindy's always looking for him." He stretched, Biddy watching. "He's always going somewhere. Probably got something going on the side."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I'm just talking to myself." He got up, rubbing his eye, and stopped by the door. "Listen, forget I said that."

"What?"

"Never mind." He started down the stairs only to lean back into view. "Your mother's making hot dogs again for supper. C'mon down." He straightened up out of sight and continued down the stairs. "Don't start any trouble. All your mother needs to hear is more of this 'I'm not hungry' stuff."

He waited until his father reached the bottom and then pulled the heavy *Flight* book over, intending to open it but losing interest and settling, finally, on resting his chin on top of it, and staring out the window at the Frasers' house next door.

He called Teddy Bell and told him to come over that night and bring his gun. Teddy owned a Winchester Special Edition BB gun and snuck out of the house periodically late at night to shoot out streetlamps or torment cats.

One o'clock, Biddy said. Wait for him in the driveway at one o'clock.

He went to bed at ten — he had school the next day — and crept down the stairs at one, easing out the front door. Teddy was wandering nervously back and forth beneath the kitchen window.

"Where's the gun?" Biddy whispered.

"It's in the bush," Teddy said. "What do you want to do?"

"C'mon." Biddy crossed to the garage, reaching down for the door handle and pausing before edging it up a foot and a half.

"What're you doin'?" Teddy whispered.

"It's too loud. It'll wake everyone up." Biddy crouched at the black opening and gestured through it. "Get in."

Teddy slithered under and Biddy followed.

"Grab that end," he said in the darkness, holding part of the ladder. The moonlight flooded through the garage-door windows. "Set it by the door. I'll slide out and you hand it to me." Teddy nodded, impressed by the amount of planning, and together they edged the

long aluminum ladder under the door and straightened up.

"Get the gun," Biddy said, and carried the ladder, swaying back and forth with the danger of a huge noise if it struck anything, around to the back of the garage, and set it gently against the roof.

Teddy returned with the gun. "What're we doin'?"

"Shh," Biddy said, climbing.

From the roof much of the surrounding area opened up, became visible. The big maple blocked the view in one direction, its branches reaching to touch the shingles, but they could see clearly in all other directions, and between the Frasers' house and another they had an unencumbered shot at Prospect Drive.

"How's your wrist?" Biddy said.

"All right," Teddy said. "This is cool."

"Let me see." Biddy took the gun. "Is it pumped up?"

Teddy shook his head. Biddy pumped it up. He leveled it toward Prospect Drive and sighted along the barrel. A car went by, flashing over the gunsight in the distance.

"Whaddaya gonna do?" Teddy said.

Another went by and he squeezed firmly, the sound an echoing burst of air. There was a sharp metallic pang in the distance.

"Oh, God." Teddy flattened against the rooftop. "Did they stop? You're nuts." He giggled.

Biddy pumped it again.

"Don't pump it up too much," Teddy said. "You'll bust it."

He leveled at the sound of another approaching car and fired when it crossed the barrel. The sound of the impact on the door rang off the houses in the darkness and the car pulled over immediately.

"Oh, God," Teddy said. "Get down."

They waited, chilly against the rough surface, but the car remained silent. Finally, Biddy poked his head over the edge. The driver had come all the way down the Frasers' driveway. He ducked back and put his finger hard to his lips.

"Goddamn kids," they heard, and Teddy's eyes widened at the proximity of the voice.

Biddy edged the barrel up again. The driver was walking back to the car. He leveled the barrel, sighting along the spur of the gunsight into the man's black back, and whispered, "Pow." The man turned off the driveway, got into the car, and drove away.

"What were you going to do if he came after us?" Teddy said. "You're a maniac."

"Someone's coming out," Biddy said. Teddy rolled closer and peered over the roof beside him. Mr. Fraser appeared on his back porch, in a bright yellow fisherman's raincoat and hat, with a garbage can in his hands.

“What’s he doin’?” Teddy whispered.

“Taking out the garbage.”

“At one in the morning?”

They watched him cross the lawn.

“He had the can in the house?” Teddy whispered.

“Looks like it.”

Mr. Fraser stopped to rest halfway down the driveway. The can was apparently heavy.

“What’s he doing in a raincoat?” Teddy said.

Biddy looked up at the sky. It was absolutely clear.

Teddy shook his head. “This whole neighborhood is nuts.”

“Get down,” Biddy said. He lifted the barrel over the top of the roof and squeezed off a shot at the garbage can.

Mr. Fraser shrieked and dropped it on the pavement.

They both shook in their efforts to prevent the laughter from bursting out, making little nasal noises. Mr. Fraser circled the can in his raincoat and gingerly picked it up by the handles again.

Biddy aimed swiftly and squeezed off another shot and again the can rang supernaturally and again Mr. Fraser dropped it with a cry. He backed away as if something dangerous were inside about to get out. He stood eyeing it for a few moments and then looked around, wiped his mouth, and swept the can up, hustling it over to the garage, his hat lofting off in the exertion. The hat lay like a piece of litter on the lawn in the moonlight.

Biddy sighted on Mr. Fraser’s rear end as he walked back to retrieve the hat. “Pow,” he whispered.

Fraser went into the house. Biddy lifted the rifle barrel away.

“God,” Teddy breathed, relieved, turning over on the roof to face the stars. “I’m surprised you didn’t shoot him.”

“Can I borrow this again sometime?” Biddy whispered, still facing the Frasers’ house.

“Sure,” Teddy said. “Keep it over here.” He looked at the wrist he’d reinjured playing football. “I can’t use it anyhow.”

Biddy remained in the car with his mother, and his father slammed the door and climbed the slight rise to the adjoining parking lot.

“You guys stay here,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

He returned with a little black puppy, furry and curling awkwardly in his arms.

“Well, come on out,” he said. “Look at him.”

Biddy scrambled out, surprised and excited by how pleased this puppy, squirming and twisting to get at him, made him feel.

“He’s great.”

His father grinned. “Were you surprised?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Here, take him. I’m gonna go thank Al.”

He took the dog from his father’s arms like a baby, feeling enormously grateful. It arched its back and tried to twist around, licking in all directions.

His mother got out of the car. “Isn’t he cute?” she said.

“He’s so tiny.”

“Oh, he’ll get big, don’t worry. Besides, we can’t have a horse with our yard.”

Across the street his father and Al waved. He felt uncomfortable, his happiness diluted by being on display.

“There’s a box in the trunk,” his mother said. “Let’s put him in that.”

His father returned and they put the box on the floor of the front seat, where Biddy could watch it.

“What’re you going to name him?” his mother asked from the back on the way home. It was a very bright day and the grass still showed green in patches beneath the fallen leaves as they passed the park.

“I don’t know,” he said. The dog made tiny cries and scraped around the bottom of the box. “Thanks,” he added, turning around so his mother was included.

“Don’t thank us,” his father said. “Thank Al Greaves.”

“I’ll thank you,” he said. “And you can thank Al Greaves.”

Upon their return Kristi, playing on the back porch, stood up, saw the box, heard the scrapings, and pushed over a potted palm. It tumbled heavily to the carpet, spilling dirt.

Her mother grabbed her arm and shook her, but she pulled away and bolted out the door, fighting past her father and running up the driveway. They followed her at a run into the garage, where she turned, trapped and furious at having trapped herself.

Biddy stood rooted next to the car, still holding the box, the dog yelping with excitement inside.

They cornered her in the garage, and she ran along the rows of shelves on the left wall, sweeping the coffee cans and baby-food jars of screws and flanges and hinges off with a cascading crash of metal and glass before they could reach her.

They shouted for her to stop and she shouted she hated them, the words echoing in the garage.

He put the box down, the dog’s legs making hollow noises against the cardboard, and ran over, unable to do anything to help, and unable to watch as well.

He sat in the grass next to a low pail of water, with his father standing over him, watching the puppy blunder around. Kristi had calmed down and shut herself in her room. The puppy ran aimlessly back and forth, barking and yipping, feinting at Biddy's hand and making harmless snapping noises with its jaws. It ran weak-legged in a wide circle, looking around wildly. On its second circuit of the yard it ran into the larger maple tree, coming to something of a halt, and toppling over.

It scrambled back up, and they laughed, relieved.

"November," his father said, his jacket open. "Nice for November, isn't it?" He crouched and grabbed the puppy's rear, swinging it around so it sprawled lightly on the grass. "It's a he, you know. What are you gonna call him?"

"Stupid," Biddy said.

"Stupid?"

He dangled his hand out, and the puppy leaped for it and missed.

"You can't name the dog Stupid."

"I don't mean it mean. It's a good name for him."

"Stupid."

"If you don't want to name it that, you can name it something else," Biddy said.

"It's your dog," his father said. "C'mere, Stupid."

On a windy Saturday, he stood in the front yard punting the ball back and forth. The Lirianos were visiting and everyone was in the kitchen. He punted it lightly from one end of the yard to the other, and then walked after it and punted it back.

Simon rode up, his bike still grinding. He smiled.

"Hey, Simon," Biddy said. "Haven't seen you in a while."

"Hi," he said.

"You want some cheesecake?"

Simon looked around, not seeing any. "Sure."

Biddy put the ball down and went into the house.

"What're you doin' out there, champ?" Dom asked.

"Punting around."

"Oh. You need cheesecake for that?"

He put a slice on a paper plate. "Uh-huh. Bye." He returned to the front and handed the plate to Simon.

"Pick it off the plate," he suggested. "I didn't bring a fork."

Simon took a tentative bite and Biddy resumed punting.

"I'm gonna run away," Simon said.

Biddy looked at him, startled. The ball thumped to the ground.

He walked over to him. "You shouldn't run away," he said.

Simon shrugged, limp and unhappy, mouth working on the cheesecake.

"Going to go to your father?"

He didn't answer.

"You shouldn't go," he repeated, searching for a reason. "Your mother'd be all upset. You're too young."

"I know," he said. "I'm too young to do anything."

Biddy imagined him in the Cessna, his white hair shaking with excitement and the vibration of the engine, refusing to sit still, crying in terror at what they were about to do, grabbing at disastrous levers and switches.

"Things'll get better," he said. "You'll see."

"I don't think so." Simon set the paper plate on the grass and climbed onto his bike. "Thanks for the cake."

He decided to talk to Cindy about it. "What's up, sexy?" she asked when he appeared at the door, and he said simply, "Simon's going to run away."

"Simon's going to run away? Who told you that? Simon?"

He nodded and stepped back from the doorway, changing his mind about the whole thing, ready to go.

"Well, come on in. You walk over here? This is worth some coffee at least. Or would you rather have soda?"

He shrugged and she put a mug in front of him.

"You make up with Mickey yet?" she said. She set a glass sugar bowl and a carton of milk near the mug.

"I don't even know what he's mad at me for."

"Don't worry about it. He probably doesn't know either." She sat comfortably opposite him. "Ronnie, your pal's here," she called.

"Where's Ronnie?"

"He's indisposed." She looked back at the bubbling coffeemaker.

"He's taking a dump," Ronnie called.

"So what's this about Simon?" she said. "Do you think he's serious?"

He was beginning to feel this whole thing might have been a mistake. "I don't know. He's pretty unhappy."

"Poor little dork," Ronnie said.

"Well, you must think so or you wouldn't be coming to me with it. You tell his mother?"

"No."

"Well she should know, don't you think?"

Ronnie sang from the bathroom that he had to dance.

"All right, you," Cindy called back. "Try and concentrate on what you're doing."

Ronnie sang that the Broadway rhythm had him and that everybody had to dance. Cindy laughed and said he was crazy. He kept singing.

"We're just going to ignore you," Cindy said. "That's all." She got up for the coffee. "Don't you think you should tell his mother?"

"I don't know," Biddy said. "She's never around."

"Well, I'm sure she cares," she said.

Ronnie was still singing about that Broadway rhythm. "Ronnie, we're tryin' to talk. We got a serious problem out here," she said.

"Serious problem? Who cares?" he called. "Biddy and I crush serious problems. We destroy serious problems. When I get out of here, we're gonna put our heads together and bury that serious problem."

"Well, hurry up."

"Ah, you'd rush a wet dream."

She was quiet.

"Sorry." He bumped around, muffled noises coming through the walls. "You didn't hear that, did you, Bid?"

"No," Biddy said.

She poured the coffee, and the phone rang. Ronnie continued to sing. She put a finger in one ear. "Who?" She darted a look at Biddy. "Hold on." She stepped around the corner into the living room, stretching the cord taut.

After a moment he went over to the corner to listen.

"I don't know when," she said, keeping her voice low. "What are you, nuts? What are you calling me here for?"

Ronnie swung open the bathroom door, the toilet flushing behind him, and caught Biddy. "Hey, champ," he said. "What're you, master spy?" He sailed into the kitchen. "What're you guys having, coffee out here?"

Cindy came back in, hanging up the phone.

"Who was that?" Ronnie said.

"A friend from work." She sat down and tapped the table with her open palm. "Biddy, let's get back to Simon."

He sat in the front line of desks with five girls in the otherwise empty classroom. Laura was on one side and Sarah Alice on the other. The second hand of the clock above the blackboard ticked off calibrations silently. Sister Theresa returned to the room and sat at her desk, facing them.

She looked up and snapped her pencil down with a curt, pleasant snap. "Okay," she said. "Before we begin, I should say I'm proud of all of you, and I only wish you all could go. You're all our best spellers and I would hate to have to pick two of you. So this is as good a way

as any."

They were the five finalists from the classwide spelling bee that day. The class period had ended before any of them had been eliminated, so after several extra rounds Sister had decided to have a special extra session after school. Of the five, only Laura was a surprise, still something of an unknown quantity.

"Now I don't have to remind you to take your time and give the game your undivided attention."

He smiled. Teddy had been first in the earlier spelling bee, and had immediately spelled "awful" o-f-f-l-e.

"Janet," she said. "'Obvious.'"

Janet spelled "obvious." Margaret spelled "resource." Mitsu spelled "algae." Laura spelled "conservative." Biddy spelled "political." Sarah Alice spelled "expressive."

On the second round, Margaret and Mitsu missed on "enigmatic" and Laura spelled it correctly, halting and picking her way over the word like someone barefoot stepping from boulder to boulder. They went through three more rounds.

Sister picked up another vocabulary book. "Well, I can't send four of you," she said. "Three is the absolute most."

"'Architect,'" she told Janet. They went through another round.

"It's okay," Laura said suddenly, out of turn. "I quit."

The others sat shocked, Biddy included. Sister stared at her.

"I quit," she repeated, an offering. "They can go instead."

In Sister's dumbfounded silence, Janet offered to quit as well, and then Biddy.

"You can't quit," she said, recovering. She focused on Laura. "See what you've started? Now, miss, if you don't want to represent Our Lady of Peace, we don't want you to represent us — and this goes for the rest of you as well — but you're not going to decide that for yourself. You're not the only ones sacrificing extra time to do this. You're going to take part in this and only be excused when you're eliminated. Laura. 'Excretion.'"

Laura looked down. "E-x … c-r-e-a-t-i-o-n," she said.

Sister looked at her. "You misspelled that on purpose. Janet."

"No, I didn't," Laura protested.

"Yes, you did. And if anyone else tries that they'll be in trouble. Believe you me. Janet."

Janet, thoroughly rattled, misspelled it as well.

Sister stared at her for a moment. "You're eliminated," she said. "Biddy."

Biddy spelled it correctly, the others already having eliminated other plausible versions.

"Okay," Sister said. "Biddy, Sarah Alice, and Laura, you're the

representatives. Laura, you're also staying after today and tomorrow." She stood up. "It seems even the simplest things become aggravating with this class. Tomorrow I'll have some practice vocabulary sheets for the three of you to work on over the holiday." She made a small, dismissing gesture with her hand. "Go ahead, go home. Congratulations."

"I didn't miss on purpose," Laura said.

"Laura, please," she said. "I can't argue with everyone today. Stay in your seat."

Biddy filed out, turning at the doorway. "And don't bother to wait for her, Mr. Siebert," she said. "She's going to be a while."

"Keep an eye on him," his father said from the kitchen. The dog circled around in the backyard, trailing a leg through its own manure.

"Stupid," Kristi said. "That's a good name for him."

"Not the way you say it," Biddy said. They sat at the redwood table, Kristi waving a Milk-Bone toward the dog and pulling it away as the dog approached, producing an occasional whine or impatient snort.

Stupid stopped, barking furiously.

"It's all right," his father said from the kitchen. "Hold him. It's only the garbageman."

A large black man dragged some cans from behind the Frasers' garage. Stupid, straining at Biddy's hand on the collar, twisted free.

"Hold on to him!" his father said, hearing the dog sprint past, and he rushed to the door and swung out onto the frame and yelled, "Come back here, you black bastard!"

Biddy heard the clang of the cans dropping at the foot of the driveway.

"Oh, not you," his father said. "I was talking about the dog. I'm sorry—"

"Jesus Christ," his mother said, her voice coming from the bathroom. "He can embarrass me with the garbageman."

"All right, all right, all right," his father said, hustling the collared Stupid back onto the porch. "No harm done. Get in there, you goddamn idiot."

"Do you have to fly off the handle every time that dog does something?" his mother said. The mirrored door on the medicine chest swung shut. "You scream like a banshee. The whole neighborhood's got to know Walt Siebert's missing his dog."

"Get away from me," Kristi said from the porch, giving the dog's rear a rough shove. It snapped at her and she bounced the Milk-Bone off its head. There was a crash from the bathroom and his mother wailed, "Oh, no." Stupid barked at the noise.

“Jesus Christ,” his father said. “This whole family’s nuts.”

Biddy lay in bed with his eyes on the ceiling, listening to his parents prepare the manicotti they were going to take to Norwich for Thanksgiving dinner. He looked up into the lights and turned away blinded, red fluorescent streamers and curlicues twisting and whirling when he closed his eyes, and when he could see again he was calling signals for the snap and the Vikings were in punt formation with himself as the punter.

Over the hunched Vikings, Steelers massed, wedging into cracks, mentally laying down lanes of attack, waiting for the snap. Eleven sets of eyes, all watching and waiting to hit him as hard as they possibly could while he hung in the air with one leg extended and vulnerable in his kick. He received the snap and took his step and a half forward, trying to concentrate with the Steelers bursting through all over, and as he connected and the Steelers swept up and over him he rebelled, revolted, wrenched himself from the moment, and returned forcibly to his bed, crying out, his cry waking Stupid, who slept with him now on the floor by the door, and the dog shifted in the dark and thumped the rug reassuringly with its tail, leaving Biddy to roll over and whisper for it, grateful for the thumping and not knowing what else to do at that point.

He woke to unusually bright sunshine. Stupid was still thumping and his father was laying his jacket and pants out over his legs on the bed.

“Let’s go, Admiral Peary,” his father said. “The expedition’s about to begin.”

“What time is it?” he asked groggily.

“Time to get ready. Time to hit the ginzos. Let’s go. We’re supposed to be there by noon.”

Biddy climbed into his pants and sat at the edge of the bed, stroking the dog. Kristi went by, her mother trailing behind combing out snarls.

“Let’s go,” his father repeated. “I polished your shoes. They’re downstairs. And comb your hair. It looks like a rat’s nest.”

Sandy and Michael, his aunt and uncle, lived just north of Norwich on what Michael liked to call a kind of a farm. It was a new ranch house of a sort, with a garage on one end and a huge family room on the other, the whole structure spreading across the property lengthwise, with the land sloping away on both sides. Each time they visited, Sandy had a new addition to show his mother. And each time, his father said, his mother came away with a bug in her ass.

Behind the house a fenced-in corral ran up an easy grade to trails

leading into the surrounding woods. Sandy and Michael had five children, three of them girls, each of whom had a horse of her own. There were rabbits as well, and ducks and cats and dogs. All this was fairly new.

Upon arriving at their house he said hello to everyone and slipped away in the confusion. The backyard was full: girls surrounded the captive horses and boys were slinging footballs back and forth across the uneven ground. He found himself in the den, a new addition. It resembled a ski lodge, with a pitched white ceiling supported by thick dark beams. There was a giant picture window and a new rug and sofa.

His father came in behind him. “Oh, Jesus,” he said. “Wait’ll your mother sees this.” He smiled. “Gonna go out?”

Biddy didn’t think so.

“Why don’t you see what’s on, then?”

He flipped the remote switch on the TV. He heard his father, back in the kitchen: “I saw it. It’s really something. Has Judy seen it yet?”

The picture rose up from the dark screen and fixed itself.

— We’ve only got a quarter, don’t you understand? What’s wrong with you?

Abbott hustled Costello off the chair.

— Well, a quarter. We can get something to eat.

— Well, I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll order a turkey sandwich and a cup of coffee, see? And I’ll give you half. But if she asks you if you want anything, you say no, I don’t care for anything.

Biddy laughed, dropping to the rug and pulling a foot in close, crossing his legs.

“Hey, hey, crusher.” Dom reached down, shook his hand. “The Lirianos make the scene. Mickey’s out back.”

Biddy nodded.

“What’ve we got goin’ here?”

— You mean we’re going to put something over on her?

— No, no, we’re not putting anything over on her.

— Gonna try and slick her?

“Click this a minute,” Dom said. “See if the game’s on.”

He turned to a football field, pale green in the bright sun, with players milling around the sidelines, hopping up and down or high-stepping here and there. He switched back.

— Aw, go ahead, have something.

— Give me a turkey sandwich.

Abbott pulled him off the chair, both of them tumbling toward the camera.

— What did I just get through telling you?

— No matter how much you coax me?

— No matter how much I coax you. You just say you don't want anything.

— I'll say I'm filled up, that's all.

— That's all. We only got a quarter.

— I ain't, but I'll say I am.

— Well, say that.

"Biddy, come on." Dom shifted in his chair. "I don't need to see these two for any reason."

"Let's go," an aunt called from the kitchen. "Everything's ready. Call the kids." They rose together, Biddy lingering to catch the end of Abbott and Costello. They left the television on.

Five aunts and four uncles — one divorce in the family — and a sweeping majority of the twenty-seven cousins as well, entered the dining room at once. The Lirianos, friends of the family, squeezed in besides. The adults would be seated at one long table, elbow to elbow. "This is nice," Dom said as he edged in. "Camp Lejeune."

The children were divided roughly into age groups along five other odd tables that spilled out into the front hall and kitchen: He stopped as he passed the main table: his aunts had suddenly moved to reveal the multitude of choices and offerings before him. Crystal and china serving dishes ringed the middle ground, clustered toward the center, supporting steaming areas of color: in the china the moist, rich green of mounded asparagus, the off-white of the cauliflower and creamed onions, the red and yellow of the manicotti; in the crystal the cool, isolated colors of black olives, cherry peppers, celery. Turnips lay beside yellow summer squash, brown gravy near the mottled stuffing. Rising from the center like an island at which these boats hoped to dock was the turkey, glistening and giving off heat and holiday smell. His mother was beside him, her hand reassuring on his hip. This was her world, not his father's, and he touched her fingers with his own, wanting to communicate how much it meant to him. He was transfixed, and only under her gentle pressure reluctantly moved on, to unclog the aisle.

Cousins were still streaming into the room, laughing and arguing over seats. Kristi was sitting at the farthest table with four other girls her age. Mickey sat sullenly opposite Biddy. Louis was not there; in two hours Stratford would attempt to complete its undefeated season against Milford, and the team had gone somewhere to eat together or be together, he wasn't sure which. Cindy was having dinner with Ronnie's parents. She cruised briefly through his thoughts and he wished she were present, though he wasn't sure why. He thought of Laura and Sister Theresa and the spelling bee, and focused on the water glass in front of him, draining all his thoughts into it, going blank.

His uncle told everyone to remember their seats and come up and get what they want this way, kids first, before the adults sat down. Dom, his wife noted, was already sitting.

"I might as well stay sitting," he said. "We'd need engineers to get me out anyway."

So they carried their plates to the central table, listening to the warm, pleasant voices of the parent chorus urging them to take more of this, try some of that. "Is that all you're having?" voices asked. "Try Aunt Judy's manicotti. Take more of Aunt Frankie's stuffing." He filled his plate and followed the line back to his seat, and they all settled in, waiting.

"Let's have one of the kids say grace," his uncle said. "Biddy's an altar boy. Biddy. Give us some grace here."

Everyone at his table grinned, off the hook. He looked at the adult table in genuine surprise but they all smiled back encouragingly.

"Grace?" he asked.

"An altar boy doesn't know grace?" someone said.

"He knows it," his mother said. "Shh."

There was a silence, forks tinkling.

"Thank you O Lord for these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty to Christ Our Lord Amen." He realized immediately that he'd botched it, muffed one of the easiest, most mechanical of prayers, but no one noticed; in fact, there was a murmur of appreciation, and the sound of knives and forks digging in.

Dinner for him was a blur, as most of the best holiday dinners were: a taste, a smell, and some cooling water on the back of his throat, appreciated and savored, standing out at each precise instant but fading quickly into the rest as the meal wore on. The adults' table was noisy and festive while at Biddy's the food was handled with dispatch. He was one of the first finished, and picked a piece of pumpkin pie and some coffee from the dessert assortment, heading for the den. He slipped into the sofa, setting the pie dish on the table, and sipped the coffee with both hands. He loved coffee and had grown up on it, his earliest breakfast memories being of Sanka and farina. The Abbott and Costello movie was over, and he changed the channel to the game with the remote switch lying on the cushion next to him.

The maroon and white of the halfback lunged forward, the colors bright and bracing on this brand-new set, and moved with the slow, unstoppable smoothness of instant replay. He drifted from the reach of arms and helmets of white with scarlet trim and tumbled headlong into the end zone, skidding on a shoulder. The replay began again. He broke his eyes away and took a bite of pie.

His father's hand landed on his head. "What's the score in here? Who's playing?"

The score flashed on the screen. “Oklahoma’s kicking ass,” Dom said behind him. “Don’t get too comfortable, by the way. We should leave for the game pretty soon.” Nebraska fumbled the kickoff, Oklahoma recovering.

His father turned from the room. “Hard to beat those Sooners,” he said. “C’mon, Biddy. Get your coat.”

“How you gonna beat these guys?” Dom called after him. “They send those big spades atcha in waves.”

They got their coats and collected Mickey and Ginnie. Ginnie told Biddy’s mother that she thought it was silly, too, but it was the last one she was going to, and the team was undefeated. They got to the game a few minutes into the first quarter.

Milford punished Stratford, up and down the field. Dom suffered visibly, then audibly. Ginnie stood up finally and said she wasn’t going to listen to it anymore. It was ridiculous to aggravate yourself over something you couldn’t do anything about. Biddy’s father agreed to give her a ride back to Michael’s.

In the third quarter the score was 35–7 Milford, and Louis swept around a block and caught the ball carrier’s helmet flush in the face, shattering his face mask. Dom and Biddy stood up, trying to get a better look. “Oh, Jesus,” Dom said, as though he had no more energy for this. Louis was sitting with his head down, trainers and teammates around him, and when one of them moved, Biddy could see jagged pieces of face mask. Louis was making circular motions with his head, bits of blood and teeth beading out along a line of spittle.

“Oh, Jesus,” Dom repeated, turning away.

They stayed a few minutes longer but Dom insisted they go back; they didn’t all have to wait to check on Louis, and there was no sense staying for the end of the game.

Back at his uncle’s, they announced what had happened and quieted the big table to a hush. Ginnie wailed, “Oh, God, I knew it.” Biddy left Mickey to field questions and returned to the TV, shaken.

During *The March of the Wooden Soldiers* Dom came back, and moved through the dining room faster than the family’s questions seemed to allow. He came into the den and fell heavily into the chair beside Biddy.

Michael followed, asking if he was sure he couldn’t get him anything. Dom was sure. Michael hesitated, and left.

“How’s Louis?” Biddy said.

“Fine. Toothless Joe.”

A headache commercial came on. It was an animation of a head with electric bolts throbbing through it. They watched in silence.

“Is that what you got your thing for?” Biddy asked quietly. “The things they did with your head?”

Dom gazed at the screen. “What?” He rubbed his eyes. “The encephalogram?” He seemed exhausted, sad. “No, that was for epilepsy. That was a test for epilepsy.”

“Why’d they test you for that?”

“I don’t know. Why do they test you for anything? They were short of cash. I was thrashing around in my sleep, Ginnie couldn’t wake me up. I had something in the Navy and they thought there might have been brain damage.”

“Brain damage?” Biddy’s eyes widened.

He changed the channel. “They don’t know. What difference does it make anyhow?”

“Don’t talk like that,” Biddy said, more moved than he wanted to be. “Do you still take pills for it or anything?”

“I’m at that stage now where it doesn’t matter,” he said. “It’s almost the end of the line.”

“No, it isn’t.” He detested and feared adults when they spoke like this.

“It isn’t?” He snorted. “Everything’s coming down around my ears. The job, the wife, now this. You know what you do in my position? Take a guess. What do you do when it’s fourth and forty-one? Punt.” He sat back and ran his palm across the back of his neck. “And sure as shit if I did it’d be blocked.”

That night although they got back late he went right out with Teddy’s rifle, allowing only the barest minimum of elapsed time for his parents to fall asleep before creeping down the stairs and out the front door. He carried the ladder silently around to the back of the garage himself, teetering under its awkward weight, and set it against the side of the building, where it promptly sideslipped and slid off the roof onto the patio with a terrifying crash. He ducked behind the garage, throwing the rifle a few yards away in a hedge, and waited. The garage light went on. He crouched, wondering what to do, what to say. The light went out. Finally he eased out of his crouch and retrieved the rifle from the hedge. He brought the ladder back around and, after a second thought, left it on the floor of the garage to account for the crash, then hurried down the driveway and into the house.

The door swung away from him and his father grabbed his arm in the dark. “What the hell are you doing out there?” he whispered. The lights came on. His mother and father flanked him. His mother’s eyes widened at the gun. “What are you doing with this?” she said, voice rising. He didn’t answer and she shook him, his neck snapping back. He started to cry and they shook him harder, demanding answers, and finally led him up to his room. They stalked back and forth past his

bed and he insisted the gun was Teddy's and he wasn't shooting at anyone. His mother finally threw up her hands and left, taking much of the noise downstairs with her. He lay quiet, his neck hurting.

His father sat on the edge of the bed, scratching the top of his head and rubbing the hair around, looking at the floor. "I don't know about you, kid," he said. "We don't have enough to worry about?"

Biddy sniffled.

"You look thin. You eating enough?" His father laughed at himself. "No. Of course you're not eating enough. You're never eating enough. I got those vitamins downstairs; I want you to use them." Biddy nodded. His father blew some air from his mouth. "Your mother's upset right now. Go easy on her the next couple days. Don't do anything more to get on her nerves. She's unhappy."

"What's she unhappy about?"

"Everything. Lots of things. Different things. You know your mother; she gets frustrated. Things don't work out the way she likes. She worries about you two. She's got no patience, she gets mad, and then you do something, or Kristi does something, and she, you know … explodes."

Biddy wiped his eyes. "Sorry," he said. "I'm sorry."

"I know, I know. I get mad, too; I'm no better. C'mon," he sighed. "Slide down." Biddy straightened his legs under the covers and his father slapped his thigh and stood up. He paused at the door as if to add something, but said only, "Get some sleep," the yellow light from the hall narrowing and disappearing with the words.

III. *Christmas*

KRISTI. *Checking the Vital Functions*

My brother told me that everything was going to be different soon. I asked him how he knew and he said he was going to make it different. I don't believe him. He can't make anything different. He came outside to play with me the day it snowed six inches and we dug tunnels for Stupid. He wouldn't let me hide in them. He was scared I'd get buried and suffocate. I hid in them anyway, and he pulled me out by my boots, and got snow up one leg. I hate it here and nobody cares. We made Sanka later and the wind came and shook the windows. I told him I hoped Stupid froze outside. I told him I hoped some Sisters were outside, too, and froze with him. I think everybody should be put in a box until they do something good, and then they can be let out. All my brother can do is things like when he was on the roof, which was stupid. They just catch him and nothing changes except he gets in trouble. He's going to do something else, I know, but he'll just get caught. He can't do anything. He can't make anything different.

Outside it was clear and cold and objects in the distance had a special clarity. Inside folding chairs squeaked all the way down the line: every boy and girl could see the blue sky through the windows and school had been out for half an hour, and yet here they were.

Sister leaned into the piano and the notes rose to the empty space high above them. The wood around the stage was old and filled the room with a damp, comforting smell. The winter sun came through the windows in great bands and swept across the maroon-and-black tiles in dull streaks.

Our Lady of Peace was forming a choir. It was, as Father Rubino often said without enthusiasm, Sister Theresa's idea. Sister Eileen didn't support it; Sister Beatrice thought her first-graders too young; Sister Marie Bernadette thought the same of her second-graders, and Sister Mary of Mercy claimed her sixth-graders were too far behind in their other work already. Mrs. Duffy knew her eighth-graders would never support it. Mrs. Studerus offered her fourth-graders, but at that point Sister was in no mood for it to help, and had decided to use, as an example, her own class, and only her own class.

Biddy sat beside Teddy and behind Laura, wondering if his voice was any good. Sister was going through the class members, one by one. There were only a few left, himself included. She banged out the introduction to "Joy to the World!" Sarah Alice stood by the upright piano, her hand on the nicked wooden top. She got as far as *"Let earth receive her King"* before Sister stopped and wrote something on a pad.

"Okay," she said. "Thank you." Sarah Alice picked her briefcase

off a nearby chair and left, buttoning her coat, unsure whether she'd been accepted or rejected.

"Mr. Bell," she said. "You're next."

Teddy got up and crossed to the piano. Choirs were for fools, he had told Biddy while they had been sitting there.

"Do you know what you are?" Sister said. "Soprano? Tenor?"

"I don't know. Soprano," Teddy said.

She looked at him and then launched into "Joy to the World!" He started to sing. She stopped playing, and he went on for several notes himself. The few people left along the empty chairs tittered.

She glared at him. "You sing seriously, young man," she said. "Or you'll wish to God you had."

She played it again, and he sang with absolute seriousness.

"It turns out you have a very nice voice. And you're certainly no soprano. Mr. Siebert." She wrote on her pad. "You're next."

He took Teddy's place at the piano. His fingers picked at the scars in the wood. Teddy indicated at the door that he'd wait. Biddy nodded without enthusiasm: Laura was already waiting. He opened the music book to "Joy to the World!"

Sister was looking at him expectantly. "Any idea what you are?" she asked, conscious of the futility of the question.

His temples grew cool. "Maybe a soprano." His fingers made ghost fingerprints on the wood.

"Soprano's high."

He nodded.

She started the song, unconvinced. He knew as he sang that something was off, that he wasn't singing even as well as he could. She continued to the end before stopping, dissatisfied. "Well, we need sopranos," she said, and leaned forward, fingering a page. "You want to try something else?" She flipped through the book.

"How about 'Hark! the Herald Angels Sing'?" he suggested. She agreed, surprised.

She misplayed the beginning and restarted. The introduction rose around him and he watched her, hesitating, and began, weak at first, hearing his voice lost in the huge room, but gaining strength and feeling his confidence grow as he climbed the higher notes. He gained power and swept into the highest parts with his voice ringing clear and strong across the empty floor: *"Joyful, all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies,"* and without loss of power or clarity his voice carried up and over the highest of the bridges: *"Hark! the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn King!"* Sister stopped, and the room shone. In the silence it was as though the metal chairs were still resonating, holding the sound.

Outside the bare branches of a maple moved silently in the wind,

the glass insulating them from exterior sound. Laura shifted in her chair and it squeaked, ending the moment. Sister cleared her throat quietly, and reached out to touch the music book.

"That's a beautiful voice God's given you," she said. "Just a beautiful voice."

That night it snowed. Biddy and Kristi knelt at the picture window in the living room with the lights out, watching the snow drift down past the telephone pole at the end of the street, the individual flakes flashing like dull fireflies as they passed beneath the streetlight. They were descending in perfect silence and beginning to lightly cover the road.

Their parents had gone into New York to see a play and the baby-sitter had turned off the TV and was reading a book in the den. In the silence they were both listening for the snow, their faces to the cool windowpane, hushed by the snow's quiet even while they realized that they were behind glass and that falling snow should make no sound in any event.

They could hear the dog bothering the baby-sitter before she let it out. The door slammed and they watched the dog trot into the cold, nose to the thin layer of snow. It, too, made no sound, swinging into the neighbor's yard, its paw prints showing dark where it crossed the driveway. It stood unmoving with the snow coming down around it, its head to the side and raised, sniffing.

His sister sat back, away from the window. "I'm going to get a sled," she said. Even she was quiet, beside him in the darkness. "If we had a sled we could go sledding."

"There's not enough snow."

"Tomorrow there'll be," she said.

They watched the dog, its nose edging along the base of a tree.

"You were crying last night," she said.

He looked at her, then returned his attention to the darkness outside.

"What were you sad about?"

He put his palm almost to the glass, feeling the cool air especially on his fingertips. He had the sensation of dipping his hand into shallow water. "Lots of things."

In the other room the baby-sitter turned the TV back on.

"Will they be able to come back from New York?" Kristi asked.

"They went on the train. That still goes even when it snows."

There was a sound of a police siren on the television, and cars screeched back and forth. She got up. "If Lisa can't come over tomorrow, you want to make a snow fort?"

"If there's enough snow. If there's enough snow and Lisa can't

come over, we'll build two snow forts and have a battle." He got up as well, and turned from the window, following her into the den. The ordered light and noise of the television were warm and welcome after the living room. He stood watching for a few moments before remembering the dog and going back into the kitchen to let it in.

The next morning, his parents were up early and his father was ruining eggs.

"How was the play?" Biddy said. He sat at the table and rubbed his eyes.

"Good," his father said. "Very good. I recommend it highly."

"You want some coffee?" His mother had an orange Sanka jar in her hand. He nodded.

"Your sister's outside." His father flipped an egg with élan, yolk breaking in midair with a flash of yellow. "She said to come out when you got up."

"Have some breakfast first," his mother said.

He got up and went to the window on the back porch. Kristi was hunched in the snow, piling up a mound. "How much is it?" he asked without turning around. "How much did we get?"

"Six inches." His father's attention remained largely on the eggs. "How's that? You kids wanted more snow, you got more snow."

He ate two of the eggs his father had made, drank some Sanka, and went upstairs and scooped everything out of his winter drawer. He pulled off his pajamas and pulled on a pair of thin cotton socks, and long underwear over them. Over that he slipped heavy woolen socks, choosing carefully from the pile and checking for holes, and then some dungarees. He found his lumberjack shirt and one of his heavy sweaters. He buckled his boots over his pants as a final touch and stood feeling secure and able to roll in the snow without any icy leaks. He grabbed his down mittens and hat and trooped downstairs.

"You need a scarf?" his mother asked as he went by.

"Nope." He let Stupid out, adjusted his hat, and followed. It felt wonderful in the winter air and he realized he'd been hot and uncomfortable inside with everything on.

"Get your fort ready," Kristi called. "Mine's almost done."

Stupid loped around, tracking rolling areas of white that Kristi had left untouched. Biddy chose a spot away from the house, at the back of the yard, and started to sweep the snow into a kind of wall with his down mittens.

"That's too far," Kristi said.

"Not for me."

She made a face and he finished a short wall he could crouch behind, and then helped with hers. Their breath puffed around them

and his feet were cold, though his hands sweated in the mittens. He curled his toes around in his boots. The air seemed to slip down his throat like water and leave him breathless.

"That's good," she said.

"You don't want any more?"

"No. That's good. Let's go." She knelt and started scooping snow together and as he ran back to his fort a snowball thumped against his jacket.

He called her a cheater, packed a ball together, and whizzed it at her. It sailed. It was hard to throw with down mittens. He kept trying but he had no control; nothing came close. One hit the house. He stayed low pulling another one together, and when he rose to throw, a snowball hit him dead center on the forehead, like a wet, easy slap. He teetered for a moment, the snow rolling off his face, and then flopped backward, arms outstretched, with Kristi laughing. He lay in the snow dead, a tribute to her aim, and then made angel wings.

Abruptly he got up, piling snow into a long line of snowballs behind the wall while Kristi's throws landed around him. When he was ready he set himself, pulled off his gloves, and stood up, grasping a cold snowball in his bare hand, pivoting at a snowy second base and firing at his sister. He kept her pinned like that, flinging them in rapid succession, and then waited, wanting her to think he'd run out of ammunition. She raised her head and he caught the top of her hat and knocked it off.

"I give!" she called. "I give!" But he had a double line of balls left, and he pelted her fort, laughing; the balls, hardened in his hand before he threw, were starting to break down her protecting wall. He used an exaggerated overhand motion, discovering he could throw down into the fort that way, the snowballs disappearing behind it and his sister shouting with every hit. "I give!" she repeated, and finally, in blind frustration, she scrambled over the wall, rushing at him, head down, scarf twirling behind her in the wind like a tail. Laughing his aim was no better than it had been with the mittens, she stormed his wall shouting "I said I give" and drove her wet blonde head into his jacket front, toppling them both into a drift, laughing and wrestling, with snow leaking in everywhere and neither of them caring.

"Don't think you're going to get everything you see, because we're only going to look," his mother said. "Sit on the seat, Kristi. I slam on the brakes and you'll go through the windshield."

They were going Christmas shopping. Biddy and Kristi had changed out of their snowy clothes, Biddy finding a triangular lump of snow in his boot. They were coming along so they could point out a few things at the toy store. Their mother had little patience trying to

decipher Christmas lists. Kristi had lost one of her mittens in the vicinity of the snow fort, and was kneeling on the seat, her hands on the dashboard.

"Where we going?" she asked after a turn. "This isn't the way to Korvette's." They referred to the huge shopping mall in Trumbull simply as "Korvette's," the name of one of the larger stores, which had moved away.

"We're picking up Cindy," his mother said.

Cindy climbed into the back, smiling at Biddy and flipping her hair out from beneath her collar.

"You can get in front," his mother said. "Kristi can get in back."

"No, it's all right." Her coat was long and white and her hair shone against it. "I'll sit back here with Biddy. Biddy's my date." He smiled, embarrassed, and Cindy scratched the top of his sister's head in greeting.

"Where's Ronnie?" his mother said.

"I told him not to come. I'm going to try and get his present today."

"Does he still want that jacket?"

"What he wants and I can afford are two different things." She edged a middle finger along the outline of her lower lip, checking her lip gloss. "He also wants Atari. Imagine that? This is a grown man we're talking about. Biddy's already outgrown it."

He wouldn't have minded one, but he remained silent.

"So what are you going to get him?"

"I don't know." She looked out the window. "He'd really like the membership in the health club renewed, but how can you give somebody that? Your fiancé?"

Biddy was hot in the car in his coat. They climbed the entrance ramp to the thruway.

"I don't know," Cindy said. "I'll look around. A watch, or something." She looked over at him. "So how about you? What's new with you? Your mother tells me you're in a choir."

"Sister says he's got one of the best sopranos she's ever heard."

"Really?" She smiled, raising her eyebrows exaggeratedly. "Another Caruso, huh?"

"Caruso wasn't a soprano, was he?" His mother kept her eyes on the road.

"No, I don't think so. I just meant a singer."

They drove on, cars around them switching lanes in an effortless choreography. Cindy straightened a gold chain on her neck, moving the clasp around to the back. "So this is going to be a year-round thing, or just for Christmas?"

"Just for Christmas," his mother said. "Sister thought it would be

nice. I think it's a good idea."

Cindy said she thought so, too. She turned her attention to the road outside, and he watched the sun and shadow cross her face as they came off the turnpike. In the bright sun he could make out white hairs here and there, but in shadow her face was perfectly smooth. While they were parking, she peered into the mirror on the windshield absently, checking herself.

"All right, let's get you kids out of the way first," his mother said, shouldering her handbag. "Kristi, where do you want to go? That toy place?" Kristi nodded. "And, Biddy, you're going to go to Herman's first, right?"

He could wander endlessly through the sporting-goods store.

"Let's do this," Cindy said. "Save time: I'll take Biddy to Herman's and you and Kristi come get us when you're ready."

"That'd be great. You don't mind?"

"I'll look around for something for Ronnie."

They split up and made their way through the crowd, Biddy fidgeting despite himself on the escalator down to the lower level. Ahead of him a woman had a large bag with a pink rabbit ear the size of an oar sticking out of it.

He threaded his way along the bottom floor, staying close to the larger plant stands in the middle and glancing back every now and then for Cindy. He led her past Koenig Art Supplies and Waldenbooks and stopped a few yards ahead while she poked her head into Hit or Miss.

She caught up to him and put her arm around his shoulder. "What're you going to get me for Christmas, anyway?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Nothing? What kind of sugar daddy are you?"

"Ronnie's supposed to get you things," he said, faltering.

"Well, you'll never make any time with offers like that. Sheesh."

They turned in to Herman's, at its mall entrance a cacophony of racquets, strung and unstrung. Her hand left his shoulder and she strayed into the tennis section. He followed and waited before finally turning away and finding the camping department.

He circled tents of all sizes, assembled like crabs or moon landers on wooden frames, and plucked guy ropes, and got down on his hands and knees and looked inside. He examined two or three different models. When he'd decided on one, he pulled out a small pad he had brought along and wrote, "Tent: EMS Explorer." There was a good chance they wouldn't get him one, he knew. He lingered by the sleeping bags as well, but in the end decided against listing one, figuring the more he put down the less chance he had of getting what he most wanted.

Beyond camping there was more to see. He moved along a wall of sneakers, mostly white with stripes of different shapes and colors. A wall full of left shoes, each on its own shelf, arranged by sport. He paused at the football section and picked the black Puma off the wall, fingering the white plastic spikes. He tried it on in one of the nearby seats — at times the size would vary with spikes — and then carefully wrote, “Puma football size 7½” on his pad. Cindy caught up to him at the basketball row. He was looking at the Converse All Stars.

“You like the stars?” she said. “I like those, with the horns. What are they? Pumas?”

“Uh-huh.” He wrote, “Converse All Stars size 8” on the pad.

“I thought I’d find you with the baseball stuff.” He put the shoe back on its shelf and shook his head. She took his shoulder again, lightly. “C’mon. Help me pick out a ski sweater. They got a sale going here.”

He found himself in front of a table piled high with sweaters, tightly knit and filled with color. He saw a kelly green he liked, but it disappeared as Cindy sifted around.

“How about this?” she said. She held up a dark blue one with light blue and red stripes across the shoulders.

“It’s really nice,” he said.

“Hello,” someone said behind him.

He turned. A stranger was smiling at Cindy, holding a sweater himself. Biddy turned back; Cindy’s sweater was suspended where she held it.

“What’re you doing here,” she said.

Biddy didn’t turn around again. The voice came over the top of his head. “Guy can’t buy a sweater?”

She looked down at the pile. She’s embarrassed, he realized; why is she so embarrassed?

“I called before and you were out,” the man said.

“Sean, this is Biddy. Walt and Judy Siebert’s oldest. Biddy, Sean.”

Biddy turned and the stranger nodded to him.

“Here you are,” his mother said. Kristi shuffled up behind her. “What’re you, interested in sweaters this year, Biddy?”

“I’m looking,” Cindy said. “Biddy’s helping.”

He glanced around. The stranger was gone.

His mother pulled a bright red sweater out by the arm. “Who was that guy you were talking with?”

Cindy colored. “A guy from my old class. Guy I went to school with. Hadn’t seen him in a long time.”

His mother kept digging around and he kept his eyes on Cindy. She was absorbed in the sweaters. He watched her spread them out and check prices. What are you lying about? he was thinking. What

am I missing?

Outside the wind shook the windows and the television antenna rattled as it buckled and swayed back and forth. It was a noise friends of his always noticed immediately on windy days in his room but one he had long since grown used to. He set the Cessna manual aside and pulled out *The Lore of Flight,* opening to the page with the bookmark. It was black outside, and the wind seemed fierce. He considered closing the curtains to conserve heat. The pencil made a soft scratching noise while he underlined.

Light aircraft, however, share one important feature with their larger counterparts: their flying control systems are fundamentally similar. All types of aeroplane, except for a few unorthodox research aircraft, are controlled in the air by movable surfaces on the wings and tail. These surfaces are operated by a control column (or handwheel) and rudder bar, and govern the attitude and actions of the aircraft when airborne.

His father poked his head into the room. “Hey, champ,” he said. “Heard we had a little trouble today.”

Biddy shut the book and nodded.

“Your mother says you were giving her a hard time at the shopping center?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What happened?”

Beyond the window the wind was making hollow, muffled sounds, like a ghost. “We came out of Herman’s and there was this dog that must’ve gotten run over or something. Its paw was mashed. It wouldn’t let anyone near it.”

“And you wanted to help.”

“Its paw was mashed.”

His father shook his head. “Albert Schweitzer, Jr. Look, Biddy … you said the dog wouldn’t let anyone go near him.”

“I wanted to get help.”

“Your mother said she got the security guard.”

“They wouldn’t do anything. They said they didn’t know whose dog it was.”

“Well, they didn’t. What are they supposed to do? Rehabilitate him?”

He looked away.

“Biddy, they’re running a business. This was just some dog from the neighborhood. I’m sure he’s all right now. His owner probably found him right after you left.”

He didn’t answer.

“What did you want to do?”

“I wanted to call someone. Firemen. I don’t know.”

“That’s right. You don’t know. Biddy, they wouldn’t’ve been able to do anything either.”

“They would have tried to find out whose dog it was.”

“That’s right. And then what? What happens when they don’t find out?”

He picked at the desk top.

“He goes to the pound, that’s what happens. Is that what you want? You know what happens at the pound if nobody claims him?”

They sat opposite each other, not moving. The panes shook.

His father shifted on the bed. “I thought I asked you to go easy on your mother. She’s unhappy right now and she doesn’t need this kind of aggravation. I thought I asked you about that.”

He nodded.

“Now am I going to hear a song and dance when I come home every time you notice an animal not in perfect health?”

Biddy hesitated a moment, then shook his head.

“All right. Now I understand you care for the dog — I’d feel bad too. But there’s so much in the world we can’t do anything about. I don’t want you making yourself miserable all the time.”

He nodded. His father sat watching him, silent.

“Your mother showed me the list you came up with today. Some haul you’re expecting. What’s with the camping stuff? You planning a trip?”

He shrugged.

“Tent, mess kit … maybe you could use that stuff in the summer. Maybe we could go camping somewhere up north.” He stood. “We’ll work on it. Maybe we’ll go to Lake Champlain. Guy I work with has a cabin up there.”

He stopped by the door and looked back. “Just excited to death by the possibility, I can see. Use the desk lamp if you’re going to read. You’re going to have glasses if you keep this up.”

He went downstairs. Biddy reopened the *Flight* book and his top drawer and pulled out a black notebook. In it he wrote, under the general heading “Questions,” “Are the brakes on the rudder pedals?”

He returned to the book. After a few moments he snapped on the desk lamp. He underlined:

Ailerons, on the wings and moving in opposite directions, push one wing up and the other down, causing the aircraft to roll. The elevator, hinged to the rear of the tailplane, pushes the tail up or down causing the aircraft to dive or climb. The rudder, mounted vertically and hinged to the fin, controls the aircraft in yaw, or its rotation about its vertical axis.

He reread the final sentence two or three times, concentrating,

before finally writing, “What is yaw?”

Laura passed a candle to him after lighting it with hers. He stood there, in the gloom, waiting for the hot wax to drip onto his fingers.

They were in one of the smaller side naves of the chapel with the overhead light off. The darkness seemed a warm brown from the candlelight on the wood, but it was drafty as well, and they stayed close to each other, three rows deep around the baptismal font. Sister had a hymnbook she was reading from in the yellow light of her candle. The class had half-page dittoed sheets.

“*O come, o come, Emma-a-anuel*,” she sang softly. Her voice rose toward the beams of the high-pitched ceiling. They joined her. The song was dirge-like, slow, and reminded him of a moment from a film he’d seen: Napoleon’s army returning from Moscow. He wasn’t sure why.

“*And ransom captive I-i-is-rael, That mourns in lonely e-ex-ile here, Until the Son of Go-o-od appear.*” They grew louder together suddenly, those in class who hadn’t been singing joining in: “*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emma-a-anuel shall come to thee, O I-i-is-rael!*” Their voices dropped again. The volume of the darkened space seemed to enforce quiet.

On the font they encircled, Sister Theresa had one of a set of four red candles burning for the first week of Advent. In the catechism it was the first of four weeks preceding the coming of Christ, each with its own special significance. To the class, it was the first step in a countdown to Christmas, the beginning of a series of incessant reminders that the day was moving ever closer. On that Monday and the next three, they would assemble in the chapel with the lights out and sing “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” For those few moments the ceremony lasted even the rowdiest of the class stood quietly and gave Sister no trouble.

They completed the song and she looked at them uncertainly. A few people shifted and coughed, in the darkness every sound magnified.

“Sister Beatrice is supposed to be here,” she said finally.

They stood about with their candles burning, waiting. They began to feel embarrassed for her, sensing everything wasn’t going as planned. Biddy’s back felt chilly. Sister Beatrice came on the first and fourth Mondays to talk about Christmas and Advent. He supposed she had more training in that than Sister Theresa. She would stand near the font and speak deliberately, as if telling a ghost story. She always came after they finished singing, and they’d finished minutes ago. Sister peered down the passageway they had come in, and looked back at them. “Well, something’s holding Sister up,” she said, her voice hushed. “I can get you started.” She tapped her finger on the

round cement top of the font, thinking. They hadn't seen her unsure of herself in any way before, and they edged forward, beginning in a furtive, guilty way to enjoy it.

She hesitated. "This is not the best place to hold a discussion," she said, almost to herself. The "s" sounds in her words seemed to linger in the empty spaces between the pews, in dark corners.

"Come on," she said. "Why don't we sing it again?"

And they raised their dittoed sheets again to the candlelight. They sang it once more, their voices alone and together in the darkness, the candles only half their original height and warm wax beginning to collect around their grip. She had only to signal with a nod once they'd finished and they repeated the song a third time, without hesitation, the final notes hanging reverently in the silence as she turned and led them back down the passageway and out of the darkness without a sound.

That night, in Fagan's House of Beef, he craned his head back to look up into the darkness of the moderately high ceiling, trying to re-create the moment in the chapel. Around him his family was fussing over who sat where, trading seats with the Lirianos. Cindy sat directly opposite him. She smiled and edged the centerpiece forward, a challenge. The flowers trembled.

"Let's get moving with those menus," Dom said to no one in particular, to a passing waitress.

Ginnie remarked that she couldn't believe they finally had everyone together. "Ronnie and Cindy together is one thing. And getting these two out—" She gestured toward his father and Dom.

"Yeah, it's thrilling," Dom said. "I could just spit biscuits thinking about it."

"Well, I'm not sure your daughter is getting married," Biddy's mother said. "I never see her with her fiancé."

Ronnie gave a small smile and Cindy blushed.

The waitress arrived and set menus in front of each of them. She spaced three baskets of breadsticks evenly along the center of the table as well.

"It's not going to be long now," Biddy's father said, opening a flap of the menu. "When's Memorial Day? June?"

"May thirty-first this year," Ginnie said.

"You guys have only a few more months."

Ronnie nodded, picking the cellophane from two breadsticks. He held them like drumsticks and began to tap quietly on his plate.

"Ronnie's going to have brown tuxes at the wedding," Louis said.

Ronnie smiled. "Louis is a Cleveland Browns fan. Brown tuxes and orange shirts."

“Lovely,” Biddy’s mother said, sipping some water. “Do they rent helmets, too?”

“It’s going to be a punk wedding,” Cindy said.

“That’s a good idea.” Dom crunched a breadstick. “We’ll give you punk presents, too.”

“We were debating where you guys should send us on our honeymoon.” Cindy smiled, lifting a flower in and out of the vase with two fingers. “We were thinking Martinique.”

“I was thinking Danbury,” Biddy’s father said.

“I think we’ll settle for Captiva.”

“Dom’ll get right on it.”

Dom nodded. “Your check’s in the mail.” He turned the menu over. “Let’s see what the Fage can come up with here.”

Biddy opened his own menu, trying to interest himself in one of the categories, “From the Sea,” perhaps, or “From the Grill,” but the candlelit tables of the bar he’d glimpsed on the way in had reminded him strongly of the chapel in the morning, and he was having difficulty concentrating on the choices presented him. Veal was his favorite, but he couldn’t decide.

“More layoffs at U Tech?” Dom said.

His father turned the menu over, dissatisfied. “Everybody’s laying off. Everybody’s cutting back.”

“I thought defense plants were a little better off, though.”

“These are hard times.”

“I hope they can afford to pay me next year,” Louis said. Biddy’s father was supposed to be getting him a full-time job at Sikorsky once he finished high school.

“I don’t know, Louis. I hope they can afford to pay me. We’re talking about a three-year cost-of-living freeze right now.”

“Things’re that tough?” Dom said.

“Things’re that tough.”

“And, of course, everything’s going up.”

“Of course. No freeze on that. The school told us now that tuition’s going up. I’m thinking about taking the kids out. We’re supporting the public schools, anyway.”

Biddy looked up from the menu.

“How about it, guy? How’d you like to be in Johnson next year?”

He couldn’t think. One fact occurred to him: all his friends were in Our Lady of Peace.

“I wouldn’t know anybody,” he said.

His father sat back. “Oh, well. You didn’t know anybody when you went to Our Lady of Peace, either.”

“The kids’ll stay where they are,” his mother said. “We’ll manage.”

"I'm not sure we'll manage. And I'm not sure there's any great advantage to having them there."

Dom and Ginnie looked down, embarrassed.

"What's he getting for the extra money? Hymns?" his father said.

His mother said it wasn't the time or place to talk about it.

His father ordered for him: veal. He cut it realizing for the first time that he had some sort of choice; it was possible he could belong or be somewhere else. He was going to Our Lady of Peace because his parents had made a decision to send him there years ago, not because of any implacable natural law. He had never stopped to consider whether he would be happier or unhappier in a public school; he had identified himself completely with Our Lady of Peace when he thought of school, for better or worse. And now all of it — the Sisters, the spelling bees, the mornings in the chapel — all of it was unstable, all could change if the need or desire arose. Events and forces he had never dreamed of could interfere and wipe out that part of his life and send him in another direction entirely.

He continued to consider the idea on the way home. Not attending Our Lady of Peace had seemed like announcing he was not a Catholic: not possible. Announcing he wasn't a Catholic was the equivalent of announcing he wasn't a boy. He was what he was.

He sat at the kitchen table while his parents and Kristi went to their rooms to change.

And yet he could go to another school: it was that simple, that liberating, and that frightening. He didn't like it where he was. Catholics didn't have to go to Catholic school. But what made him think he'd be any happier with kids he didn't know? And what if it wasn't the school's fault he was never happy?

His mother came into the kitchen in her tan bathrobe and flopped a wicker basket of envelopes and cards onto the table, scattering them across the top as though someone had dropped an oversized deck of cards. She sat and began to sort them into odd piles.

"Mom, it wouldn't cost anything to go to Johnson?" he asked.

His mother shook her head. "Don't worry about that. You're staying with the Sisters."

"I don't want to go if you guys can't pay."

"We can handle it. Your father gets a little dramatic sometimes. I'll make sure we can handle it."

He watched her hands move swiftly through the pile. "What're you doing?" he finally asked.

"I'm taking down those who sent us Christmas cards."

"Why do you write them down?"

"There are always a few surprises." She finished sorting, and went back through a pile. "Some of these people we have to add to our list."

“You didn’t know you wanted to send them cards?”

She put her pencil down. “Biddy, I’m not running this show. I don’t choose our friends. I don’t choose our activities. I don’t make decisions. I get a vote. Sometimes.”

Biddy looked down, sorry he’d done this. His mother’s tone softened. “They’re people we haven’t been in touch with, or friends of your father’s I never met. Here, you can help. Address some envelopes. You can stamp, too. There’s the sponge.”

He took the envelopes as she passed them, each paired with an incoming envelope and address he could refer to.

“When’s that spelling bee?” she asked.

“Tuesday night.”

“We have to get you some pants. You’re growing out of the black pair.”

He began to worry about the spelling bee again. He was probably the best speller in the class and he wanted no part of it.

She glanced past him, out the window. “It’s snowing again.” He went to the back porch and turned on the garage light. The wind was blowing the snow down in a hard diagonal, the tracks and marks in the old snow beginning to fill in. He remained at the window, watching.

“Hey,” his mother said from the table. “Whatever happened to the envelopes?”

“I’ll help,” he said, distracted. “I’m just thinking.”

“Don’t think too much,” she said, wrapping rubber bands around finished piles of envelopes. “Remember, that’s how I get into trouble around here.”

The snow mixed with sleet, covering halves of trees. The windows began to glaze, and snow piled upon the sills as if to protect them from the darkness.

“This weather sucks the big wazoo,” his father said. He closed the drapes, moving the dog’s nose away.

“Stand still. Take your finger out of your nose,” his mother said. She was pinning cuffs on his new black pants, annoyed she hadn’t done it earlier, and he was shifting, trying to see out. It had been snowing lightly and intermittently for nearly twenty-four hours.

“Turn around a little bit. The other way.” He turned his back to the window. Stupid brushed by and his mother asked in despair if he could believe the way this dog was shedding.

He and Laura had decided to sit together and she and her parents were going to save four seats. He was more anxious about keeping them waiting than about the spelling bee. He hadn’t told his parents about the saved seats.

When his mother finished, he stepped out of the trousers and dawdled around the kitchen, chilly in his underwear. The sewing machine buzzed and chugged in the cellar. He walked into his father's room. His father was combing his hair, a green bottle of cologne on the dresser beside him, luminous against the white wall.

"Get your shirt on," he said. "We need a tie, don't we?" He opened the closet and looked over a rack on the door.

Biddy indicated a green one with small brown-and-blue pheasants.

That one would be around his knees, his father said. He slithered one off the rack and flipped it around Biddy's neck. The knot failed and he squinted and knelt close, his breath smelling of whiskey. It failed again. He couldn't do it that way, he announced. He turned Biddy around and tied it from behind. One end was long and they tucked it in his shirt.

His mother returned and handed him his pants and he pulled them on in the kitchen. He could hear the clock on the stove. His coat and hat were on a kitchen chair, and he put them on and stood at the sink, looking out the window at the unceasing snowfall.

They were minutes late and he picked out Laura among the rows of folding chairs and led his family over, suddenly unsure of what he was going to do with both sets of parents together. They introduced themselves: Laura's parents had already been warned and his seemed unsurprised as well. They took their seats, and Sister Theresa climbed the stage to thank everyone for coming, mentioning that the students participating were the best spellers in the diocese and there were no losers tonight, only winners, and that everyone had a good deal to be proud of. She introduced a Sister from St. Ambrose and another from Our Lady of Perpetual Grace who said the same things in different words. Eight parochial schools were being represented. Each student was called out of the audience to polite applause to sit on the folding chairs on the stage behind the podium. Three judges were introduced and it was explained how the words had been selected. He was surprised by the shabbiness of the trappings, the casual, thrown-together look of the whole event. The judges sat at card tables.

He was near Laura and Sarah Alice, looking out over the audience. His mother smiled at him. They began. They had to repeat the word after it was given, spell it, and repeat the word again. The judges used the word in a sentence and they were allowed a minute and encouraged to take their time. Almost no one did.

It went rapidly. He heard his name called and crossed to the podium, looking over the microphone, away from his father. "'Stationery,'" one of them said. "I have to go to the store to get some stationery."

He refocused on the microphone. He'd gone over the word the week before with Sister: the trick was distinguishing between the homonyms. Something fastened in place was a-r-y; paper for letters was e-r-y. Just remember paper, e-r, she'd said. He spelled it, quickly. "That's correct," the judge said listlessly, and he went back to his seat, relieved.

On the second round, people started to miss. Whenever it happened, there was a silence and then a judge said, "I'm sorry." The silence was chilling. Every now and then a contestant would receive an extremely easy word, inspiring furious envy in some and detached appreciation of his or her good fortune in others. Of all the contestants only one, a short, plain girl from St. Ambrose, took her time, pausing between each letter like someone working on high explosives. She wore a black dress and had sticklike arms. He got bored and irritated just listening to her.

He passed safely through five more rounds and by the end of the sixth only six contestants remained. As the eliminated contestants had missed, they had returned, in shock or relief, to their original seats in the audience. The six survivors looked about the sea of empty chairs on the stage. The judge announced "intransigent," and the first two to attempt it failed, leaving only the girl from St. Ambrose and three from Our Lady of Peace: Laura, Biddy, and Sarah Alice.

"'Intransigent,'" the girl from St. Ambrose said into the microphone. She was relishing this, he was beginning to realize with some distaste. She began with paralyzing deliberateness, and he could sense the audience's suspense and resented how easily she had been able to manipulate them. When she finished, there was a burst of heartfelt applause.

Laura was next and misspelled "ostentatious." He froze when he heard the wrong letter in sequence, and after a beat the judge said, "I'm sorry." She descended the stairs and took her seat next to her father, who patted her hand.

The rounds continued. He lost count of the number of words he spelled. The girl from St. Ambrose labored through another one, and he returned to the podium and waited, one of three left.

"'Diary,'" the judge said. The crowd relaxed audibly, happy for him. "I like to write in my diary."

"'Diary,'" he said, rapidly. "D-a-i-r-y." He stood waiting but there was a silence instead, a familiar silence, and the judge said, "I'm sorry." He went down the steps unbelieving, repeating it to himself, unsure of what had happened. Had they made a mistake? He sat beside Laura, and his father leaned down the row. "You spelled dairy," he whispered.

Sarah Alice and the girl from St. Ambrose went back and forth for

some time. By this point the audience applauded them both for every word, and when Sarah Alice finally missed she was allowed to stay onstage, in case the other girl missed as well. She didn't, and everyone gave her a rousing ovation.

"It's too bad," his father said in the car on the way home. "To get all those tough words and then miss one like diary." It was very cold in the back seat. Biddy kept his hands in his pockets.

"How come you've never had Laura over the house?" his mother said.

"I don't know," he said. "She's coming over tomorrow."

They turned a corner and the rear of the car slid to the left. "What kind of doctor is he?" his mother said. "Psychiatrist?"

"Um-hm." His father rubbed the windshield with the flat of his palm.

"Maybe we could get some free advice," she said.

"We could use it," his father said. The car turned carefully onto their street, its traction unsteady beneath them.

The next morning when he answered the door, it was Louis, not Laura.

"Hi," Louis said. "Can I come in?"

Biddy opened the door wider. The snow had stopped, and the wind was blowing powder around, wet and cold.

Louis stomped his boots on the mat on the back porch and bent over and brushed away the snow that clung to his dungarees.

"C'mon in," Biddy said. He looked back into the kitchen, as if for help. "Your parents coming over too? Mickey?"

Louis shook his head, pulling off his hat. It was white with a large red pom-pom at its peak and the red letters EXECUTIVE SPIRIT across the front. Biddy's father had given it to him. It advertised Sikorsky's new business helicopter, the Spirit. It was an awful hat, but Louis was being a staunch employee, even before he was hired.

He'd come alone, he said. He took off his jacket and waited on the porch, holding everything in front of him.

"Well, come on in," Biddy repeated, wishing his parents were home. He led Louis into the kitchen and pulled a chair away from the table. Louis sat down, clothes in his lap.

"Want me to take your coat?"

"It's okay." He looked around the kitchen, apparently content.

Biddy sat opposite him, and fiddled with the sugar bowl. He looked at the clock. He could hear Kristi in the den with the Saturday morning cartoons.

"Kristi, Louis is out here," he called.

"So what?" she said. In the silence that followed her answer,

Road Runner beeped.

Louis shifted, a glove sliding to the floor. His nose was still red from the cold.

Biddy got up and went to the refrigerator. “Sure you don’t want anything? Did you have breakfast?” He looked again at the clock.

“No, thank you. Do you have to go somewhere?”

“No. Someone’s coming over, though.”

“Oh.” He gazed at the cabinets, not in any rush. “I just wanted to talk.”

The doorbell rang. Biddy let Laura in and led her back to the kitchen, uncertain what to tell her. Louis nodded at her.

“Laura, this is Louis,” he said.

“Hi, Louis.”

“Hi.”

She stood awkwardly half in, half out of the room, and he pulled a chair out and motioned for her to sit. She made the long silences that seemed to punctuate discussions with Louis even more uncomfortable than usual for him.

“Let’s go out or something,” Biddy said. “Let’s fix the snow fort.”

Louis shrugged.

Biddy could tell she thought something was strange but wasn’t sure what. She didn’t know Louis was retarded and Biddy had blown his opportunity to tell her. Maybe she would figure it out, he thought.

“What do you want to talk about?” Biddy said.

Louis looked at him.

“It snowed a lot last night,” Laura offered. “I saw buried cars that you couldn’t see almost on the way over.”

“I had to help my father dig out this morning,” Louis said. They were silent, Biddy thinking of nothing as a rejoinder. Louis ran his fingers along the edge of the tabletop. “I don’t usually come over here. I came because Biddy’s my friend and I wanted to talk.”

Biddy waited, and finally asked again what he’d like to talk about.

“Are you a football player?” Laura said.

Louis nodded and rubbed something from his eye.

“You look like a football player.”

“Thank you.” He looked at the fruit bowl before him. “Can I have a pear?”

The back door opened with a merciful bang and a bag of groceries tumbled in. A foot edged it forward and then his parents followed with additional bags, stepping over the one on the floor.

“Here we go, here we go, here we go,” his father said. “Hey, Louis. Long time no see. Where’s Mom and Dad?” They swept to the counter and set everything down with a gentle crash. “Help us with

the bags in the trunk, Biddy. Hey, Laura. How're you today?" Laura smiled.

His mother was outside pulling more bags from the open trunk. Biddy went out and took a big one from her arms. She asked about his coat and he said he'd only be out a second. He brought two bags in.

His father was putting cheese away in the refrigerator. "So you both fell a little short last night, huh?"

"We're glad for Sarah Alice," Laura said. "I missed a dumb one."

"How about this guy? He got all the hard ones, and then he goes in the tank on one I could spell."

Biddy set the bags on the counter with a clank: cans inside.

"So how's Mom, Louis?" his mother said.

"Okay." He got up, still holding his coat, hat, and gloves. "I guess I'm gonna go now."

"Hey, stick around," his father said.

"No. I have to go." He put his hat on. "I feel better now."

Laura smiled up at him. "It was nice meeting you."

"It was really nice meeting you." He walked to the door, stepping over a jar of peanuts, getting his arm caught in his coat. Biddy followed him, stooping over the tumbled bag and closing the door behind him.

His father ran a finger down the long white receipt. "What'd he want? Why'd he say he feels better?"

Biddy shrugged.

"Did he feel bad when he came?"

"I don't know."

"He probably feels bad about that job," his mother said. "He was supposed to have part-time work by this point." She was collecting things for the freezer in one bag.

"Hey, I'm doing the best I can. It's not like placing Frank Borman, you know. If it's at all possible to get the kid a job, we'll get him a job."

Biddy sat back down next to Laura. "Who's Frank Borman?" she whispered. He didn't know. They watched more of the unpacking — fish, five or six packages of it, and club soda — before going outside to explore the new drifts the wind and snow had created the night before and was reshaping even as they played.

He'd put off going to Confession for three weeks and his mother wasn't having any more of it. That was it, she said. No more screwing around. She was going over this afternoon and he was going with her.

Confession was between four-thirty and six on Saturdays, and it was now four-fifteen. Laura's mother had picked her up earlier, honking the horn and waving from the car. He sat on the back porch,

his rear end and knees wet and his feet cold. The dog lay on the floor nearby, dozing. One ear was flapped out as though he were listening through the floor for something.

His mother came into the kitchen from the bathroom, a lipgloss brush between thumb and forefinger. “Come on. Change your pants and shoes. I want to get back.”

He got laboriously to his feet and stepped out of his boots. As he passed through the kitchen he asked if Kristi was going.

“Kristi went last week.” His mother’s voice echoed faintly in the bathroom. “If you’d gone with her you wouldn’t have to go now.”

Upstairs he dug around in his closet and found his other pair of boots. They were olive drab but his pants could cover them.

“I don’t have any sins anyway,” his sister said from her bedroom.

“You got big ears, you know it?” He sat on the bed and pulled on his black pants.

“You got big everything,” she said.

He buckled his boots and left without answering. His mother already had the car warmed up. “Give ’em hell,” his father called from the den. “Don’t tell them about your old man’s drinking.”

The wind died at the church door, leaving them in a hushed quiet, the brightness of the afternoon shut out behind them. “Don’t rush your penance,” his mother said, and after that they were quiet, not to speak again until they were safely out of church.

There were five or six others present in a rough line in the pews, one behind the other. Biddy and his mother sat together. They swung the kneeling benches down and knelt, the creaking obtrusive but expected. He folded his hands in the adult manner, fingers interlocked casually. Only the young and the very pious folded them palm to palm with the fingers aligned. His mother bowed her head, and he tried to compile a list of sins at the last minute, vaguely uneasy at his lack of remorse. He had long since stopped believing he could accurately recount all of them, and had settled on one of Sister Theresa’s concessions during a discussion: whatever you can remember, as long as you don’t willfully leave anything out.

He glanced at his mother. Her head remained silent and still above her hands, her eyes gazing into the floor as if for support. Her intensity shook him. His eyes traveled to the Novena candles and from there to the Virgin Mary. He found himself taking stock, reviewing whether or not he was worthy to receive the grace and mercy that a Sacrament, even Confession, the most casual of sacraments, represented. He wondered if he was worthy of this church and these things around him.

He leaned back, surprised at his own sudden intensity, solemnity.

Yet he was certain that all of this was in some central way good and that he had to in some way earn it, that he couldn't simply continue to wander into the building and expect to be a part of it all. He shivered, rubbing the sleeve of his coat. He was taking stock of himself whether he wanted to or not, out of the blue, kneeling in the darkness beside his mother, and he wasn't sure he knew how to do it.

He looked into the face on the crucifix. People shifted in the pews and an odd snort or gagging sound lingered in the silence. He didn't know where he stood in the eyes of God.

He wasn't, he knew, even sure God was present at times. Where did somebody who wasn't even sure stand?

His mother rose as if in response and padded to the confessional curtain, pausing before slipping in. He was next, and his thoughts crowded against one another with urgency: he was basically good, he felt. He rarely willfully hurt anyone. He did what people said. He broke a minimum of commandments. So why was he not happy? The simplicity of it shook him. If he was good, why was he so unhappy? Why was he only sure of God on Christmas, if then? Why couldn't he do more with Louis? Why did he always aggravate his parents?

His mother emerged from behind the curtain and passed silently into the nave for her penance. He hesitated until he heard the people behind him shifting expectantly, and then he got up and moved past the curtain into the dark.

He knelt on the wooden bench in front of the screen as his eyes adjusted. Father Rubino was picking at his eyebrow with his thumb and forefinger, looking off to his right.

"Bless me Father for I have sinned," he said. "I haven't been to Confession in three weeks." He spoke in a whisper and Father Rubino wasn't supposed to know who he was, but that was a fiction. He steadied himself on the partition. "I don't know, Father. I was going to tell you all these things like lying and swearing. But that's not right." The boards beneath his knees groaned.

"What?" Father said. "What's wrong with you?"

He was close to tears and felt foolish because of it. "I don't know," he repeated, and started to cry and hold it back at the same time. "I don't think about God except at Christmas, I don't help my sister at all, and sometimes I don't like to be around my friend Louis and I know that's wrong. I make my parents unhappy all the time." He stopped, still not having heard any sort of response at all, having taken a chance and still not certain how to proceed.

Father was silent. Then he said, "Biddy, we all have those kinds of feelings. We all think maybe we could do more for other people. All we can do is try."

Biddy knelt in the dark, wiping an eye with his hand.

“We can’t torture ourselves about it. All we can do is resolve to be better, to try harder.” Father paused. “Now tell yourself you’re going to work harder at it and try to live those words.” He moved around, apparently waiting for some response. “And Christ should certainly live in you always, not just at Christmas.”

Biddy looked down. “He doesn’t,” he whispered.

There was an awful silence. He waited for expulsion, public exposure, shouts, flashing lights. For the roof to lift off and God to pluck him away.

He could feel Father looking at him and he swallowed, ready to absorb whatever he deserved.

“Say twenty-five Our Fathers and twenty-five Hail Marys,” Father said. He absolved him in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

He stumbled to the altar, the air cool on his cheeks and ears, alternating the prayers while his mother waited at the back of the church. He was going to get out of here, he thought. He was going to change things or get out of here, because he was inadequate and everything around him was inadequate and no one seemed to care one way or the other. What was his penance? Did God expect only fifty prayers, as well? He finished his penance in the car on the way home, the houses reeling past as he avoided his mother’s gaze, feeling spiritually fraudulent beside her.

Ronnie sat across the table from him, his hat still on, losing at War. Something was bothering him and he was flipping the cards on his turns with irritation.

“Your turn, sport.” He tapped the table impatiently.

Biddy pulled a jack. Ronnie turned his card face up. A jack as well. Biddy laid three face down off the jack and turned over a two, sagging, trying to build up the foundations for some sort of drama. Ronnie was playing as if he were waiting for a train.

Ronnie flipped over his card after three face down: two as well. Biddy spread three more and turned over a nine. Ronnie did the same.

“Whoa,” Louis said. The rows of stalemated cards reached almost to the end of the table. Biddy was grateful for the extraordinary, and anxious to acknowledge it. He wanted an outside observer to lean over them and ask Ronnie if he realized the odds against what had just happened. But there was only Louis watching, attentive to everything and reacting to almost nothing. They sat around the Lirianos’ kitchen table, Ronnie waiting for Cindy, Biddy for Mickey.

Ronnie was drinking dark beer. They had themselves a little standoff here, he said. He laid three more out and edged the tip of his next card off the top of the pile and dropped it back, teasing. He put a

head on his beer.

"C'mon," Biddy said.

He smiled and flipped his card, looking at Biddy as he drank. It was a queen.

Biddy turned his over slowly, and then with a yelp as the image leaped at him: queen.

The door banged open, cold air filling the room.

"Don't even ask," Cindy said, sweeping into the kitchen. "I don't even want to talk about it." Her nose was red and her pants wet from the knees down, and she went right to the stove and put a kettle on. She pulled a mug out of the cabinet and dropped a tea bag into it.

"Have trouble with the car?" Ronnie asked.

She pulled at her scarf. "I'd like to push it off a cliff." She piled her coat, hat, and scarf on the hamper in the hallway. "My legs are soaked. I'm gonna take a shower. Get the water when it boils, all right?"

The bathroom door shut and they heard the thump of her empty boots on the tile floor. After a few moments the shower went on.

Ronnie finished his beer and set the glass down carefully. The two queens still lay face to face atop the table-long lines of cards. "Whose turn is it?" he asked. He started a new line of three face down and turned over a seven. He seemed to be listening to something in the sound of the shower.

Biddy waited, not for the sake of dramatic tension, but for Ronnie's attention to refocus on the game. He turned over the fourth card off his deck. It was a three of clubs.

"Three," Louis said. "Ronnie wins."

Biddy waited, and then pushed the long rows together into a pile in front of them. "I quit. I don't feel like playing anymore."

Ronnie looked at him. "No, let's play. I win, right? My turn." He turned over another card. Biddy watched him for a moment before continuing.

The teapot was whistling. Ronnie concentrated on the cards and they sat listening to it until Louis got up and turned off the heat and poured the water into the mug.

He won three or four in a row before the shower stopped. Ronnie's concentration on it had affected Biddy and Louis as well, and they too were waiting, ready, as if Cindy's emergence from the shower had a special significance.

The bathroom door opened and she appeared wrapped in a bath-sized white towel. A big orange cat on it looked at Biddy sideways. MOMCAT was written over its head, the large letters running down Cindy's left side. She shuffled into the kitchen in her father's slippers, big maroon things, and sat down at the table, hair dripping.

Ronnie's eyes were on the cards. "You gonna sit here like that?"

She looked over for her tea. "It's pinned." She lifted the mug from the counter without rising and set it in front of her. "Who's winning?"

No one answered. "Ronnie is," Biddy said finally.

"What's wrong with you today?" Cindy asked. She blew on her tea. "What're you, mad because I'm late? How fast am I supposed to change a tire in thirty below?"

"I stopped by on the way home from the Tap last night," Ronnie said, flipping over a six. "You weren't here."

She flinched. Ronnie, with his eyes lowered, missed it.

"So what time'd you come by?" she said. She tried to sip her tea but it was too hot.

"Two. Two-thirty. We closed the place."

Louis stood up. "I'm gonna go watch TV," he said uncertainly.

"What are you doing here today, guy?" Cindy asked Biddy, smiling. "Just come over to play cards with the Cincinnati Kid here?"

"My mom says I got to make up with Mickey," he said. "He's supposed to be back by now. I don't even know why he's mad at me."

She lowered her chin to the hot mug and slurped some tea without picking it up. She focused on the beer glass. "You drinking in the morning now?"

Ronnie looked at her. "You don't want to talk about it?"

She lowered her eyes. "It's stupid. It's not worth talking about. And it's cold sitting around like this," she said. "I'll be right back." She took her tea with her.

"I'm gonna go," Biddy said, standing before Ronnie could react. He didn't seem to hear. "Tell Mickey I waited awhile."

Ronnie stirred. "You going to walk all the way home?"

"It's not too far. Bye." He pulled on his hat and coat, holding both gloves in one hand in his rush to the door. "Bye," he repeated.

"Uh-huh," Ronnie said, looking at the sink. "Take it easy."

He shut the door, the cold rushing through his open coat. He was two houses down when Dom's car turned onto the street, and he ducked behind a tree instantly, not wanting to go back. He made certain no one in the car had seen him before edging around the other side of the trunk and starting down the street, kicking up snow as he went, his hands stuffed deep in his pockets.

The twentieth was a school day and when he woke up he padded downstairs to see if anyone had remembered his birthday. They hadn't. His father was shaving and his mother sat in her robe at the table with the paper from the day before and some black coffee.

"What are you doing up so early?" she asked. "You can sleep for another half hour."

He shrugged. “I know.” He put some water on, and a teaspoonful of Sanka into a cup with some sugar.

“You want something hot? Some farina?”

He made a face. “I’ll get some cereal.”

He poured the cereal and ate across from his mother, waiting, but nothing happened. Usually they said Happy Birthday, and his mother had once had special pastries for breakfast. Some years, though, they forgot, and this was one of them. He finished the Sanka, his feet cold in his slippers, and went upstairs to dress.

In school it was the beginning of the final week of Advent, and they returned to the chapel, where Sister had all four candles lit, and sang in the dark, starting with “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” and finishing, this time, with “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” Laura stood near him. Between songs she whispered, “Happy Birthday.”

When he got home, his father was in the kitchen and asked him if he wanted to go look for a tree. He agreed, surprised, dropped his book bag in a chair, and they left on the spot.

They searched through four different places, wandering up and down endless crooked aisles of trees, examining candidate after candidate that seemed fine to Biddy but never quite right to his father. When they left the fourth lot, he suggested one more place.

They didn’t find anything there, either. It was in Shelton, and by the time they pulled onto Route 8 for the drive back it was dark. Halfway home they stopped at a shopping center and his father ran in and bought razor blades, napkins, and camera film.

When they finally reached their driveway, it was ten after six. He wondered abstractedly if his mother would be angry at their being late.

Opening the back door, he saw his uncle’s car parked across the way in the Frasers’ driveway, recognizing it even in the gloom, and it hit him all at once before he stepped inside and the chorus of voices called “Surprise!” He remained in the doorway with his parents behind him, looking on a kitchen transformed with streamers, presents, faces. Two balloons drifted along the ceiling. Dom was there, Cindy, Louis, Teddy, uncles and aunts and cousins. Kristi, Simon, Ronnie, and Laura, holding her present against her leg. A white-and-brown cake lay centered on the table. The writing on the frosting was illegible.

His mother stepped around him. “Did we surprise you?”

He came farther in, admitting he’d seen his Uncle Michael’s car. Everyone groaned and spoke at once, largely to his Uncle Michael.

“Did we fool you up to that point?” his mother said.

He assured her they had. They led him to a seat and began to pile presents before him on the kitchen table, stacking them on the floor

near his feet when they ran out of space. They demanded he open them and talked while he did about the preparations he had missed, the times they had been convinced they'd given the whole thing away. He didn't remember any of the instances they spoke about. As he opened each present, someone claimed it as his or hers: toys from Teddy and Simon, one or two books, and clothes from everyone else. He thanked everyone, unsure what to do next, and the party began to gain an energy independent of him. One by one everyone shook his hand and wished him Happy Birthday, even Simon, who seemed proud to have been given his own separate opportunity. His Aunt Sandy kissed him and Teddy punched him on the arm. Cindy hugged him cheek to cheek, and he could smell her skin and the soap she washed with. Frank Sinatra came on the stereo. He slipped down the hall and into the den, Stupid barking and scratching at the cellar door as he went by.

Laura and Louis were watching the news. Rescuers were kneeling over a hole in the ice. Louis took the party hat off his head. Along the bottom of the screen, "Winter Storm Warning" was announced in small yellow letters. Motorists were advised not to drive unless absolutely necessary. In the other rooms, attention was also moving toward the weather: the snow was coming down harder.

The party started to break up. Michael and Sandy, with their long drive, left almost immediately, coming into the den to wish him one more Happy Birthday before leaving. Simon's mother arrived to pick him up and Teddy's parents phoned and told him to head home before it got much worse. A steady stream of people seemed to be saying goodbye, and then it was quiet. With Louis intent on the television, Laura reached under her chair and pulled out her present.

"Here," she said. "I didn't want to give it to you then."

It was one of *Jane's All the World's Aircraft.* He held it with both hands and thanked her.

"Was it a surprise?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I'm glad." He heard the doorbell over the noise in the kitchen and his father began to call her.

"That's my mother," she said, pushing herself out of her chair. "Bye. Happy Birthday."

"Thanks," he repeated, still holding the book.

No one flipped the Sinatra record when it finished. The sounds from the kitchen were subdued; only the Lirianos remained. His father called him.

Ronnie was standing away from the table, leaning against the counter. His parents and Cindy sat with their backs to the wall; Dom and Ginnie were more in the center of the room.

“C’mon in here,” his father said. “This is supposed to be your party.”

The presents had been moved to the back porch to make way for the liquor, coffee, and cake. His father sipped some anisette. “You made out like a bandit.”

“He gets two Christmases this year,” his mother said.

Cindy gestured toward the table. “You never had a piece of cake.”

“You never got our present either,” his mother said. She handed forward a small wrapped package. While they cut him a piece of cake, he opened it. It was a silver digital watch with a large face. The face reflected the lights on the ceiling.

“Seiko,” his mother said.

He lifted it from its box and snapped it around his wrist, and it slid around and down his arm, too big.

“It’s great,” he said. “Thanks.”

Ronnie raised a glass. “Here’s to the birthday boy,” he said. “Eustace Lee Siebert.”

“Eustace Lee,” Dom said.

“Eustace Lee.” They raised their glasses.

“Thirteen today,” his mother said.

“God help us,” Ginnie said. They drank.

He wandered into the den. “I think we choked him up,” he heard his father say.

Louis was dozing, his head to one side. The party hat was on the floor near his feet. Biddy sat down and pulled his legs up onto the chair, holding the book on aircraft in one hand and the Seiko watch in the other.

A commercial ended and Charlie Brown appeared. His head was down and he walked off the screen, leaving a tiny tree bent in half by an oversized ornament hung from its top. The rest of the *Peanuts* cast walked on and decided it wasn’t such a bad tree after all. They surrounded it, and when they backed off it was sumptuously decorated and no longer scrawny. Charlie Brown came back on screen and they all faced him, spread out behind the tree. Biddy wrapped his arms around his legs and held on, watch clacking on the book cover.

They all shouted: “Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown!” And started to sing: “*Hark! the herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the newborn King.’*” Charlie Brown joined in, and after a chorus, so did Biddy, his eyes watering and his knees pulled in tight against his chest, mouthing the words as the screen filled with falling snow and credits.

Obtaining Clearance

Everyone asks about my brother and no one asks about me. I bent my finger all the way back a while ago and showed them, and they told me if it hurt the next day we'd go to the doctor. They didn't ask me about it the next day. It still hurts and I don't care and they don't care.

The Sisters never yell at him. They said to me once I wasn't as good as he was. They try to hurt me but they can't. They all try, but they can't. They can make me stand in front of the class and apologize or sit in the office alone. They can tell my parents things. I don't care. When I get old, I'm going to Long Island or England, and I'm never going to see anyone again.

I'm tired of talking about him. He's a baby sometimes. He never cries or yells but he gets his way anyway, and it doesn't matter what I do. When I do anything I'm just bad, but everyone treats him like Louis, and that's not fair, because Louis is retarded.

Biddy lifted a stack of boxes from the bottom, raising himself slowly to his full height and pausing to make sure everything was balanced. The ornaments shook and rattled in the boxes like bones.

"Dad, you want all of these?" he called.

"Bring 'em all."

He stepped gingerly into the hallway and took the stairs one at a time, the boxes shifting slightly every so often. He was leaning backward as far as he dared so that they would all rest gently against his chest. His head was turned aside for the top box, which lay against his cheek.

At the bottom step he stopped, unsure how best to execute the turn around the foyer into the living room.

"Oh, look at this," his mother said. "Walt, look at this."

He stood teetering, face to the wall and cool cardboard on his cheek.

The top box was lifted away and he could see his parents again. "Sometimes I don't know about you, kid," his father said. "All we needed was for you to trip coming down those stairs."

More boxes were taken from him, and the two he was left with seemed weightless. He imagined the unlucky step near the top, his foot catching, knee bending sharply and unexpectedly, boxes spilling out in a lazy arc, the fragile flat sound of shattering Christmas ornaments, his wrists and elbows and knees landing on the boxes and stairs.

"C'mon here," his father said. "Start unwrapping."

His mother had their trim-the-tree music on the stereo, *The Voices*

of Christmas, a hodgepodge of different artists' versions of Christmas carols. Mahalia Jackson was singing "Silent Night."

His father had picked out the perfect tree, and they'd sawed a good two feet from the top in the garage to fit it to the living room. Then they'd wrestled it onto the tripod base, where it had swayed unsettlingly, a full fifteen degrees off the perpendicular, and they'd sawed at the trunk once again at an angle and jammed chips of wood into the cylinder that held it in the tripod to straighten it. At present it stood, with reasonable steadiness, in front of the picture window. It really was a beautiful tree, although a bit full at the ceiling, and the living room was beginning to smell of pine.

Open boxes of ornaments were laid out on the couch side to side. He lingered over his favorite, a rose-colored, grapefruit-sized sphere with hand-painted red and silver bands. It had been part of a pair, and Lady had broken the other years ago as a puppy. His mother claimed they had belonged to her grandmother — they were that old — and if anything happened to this one she'd throw herself under a truck.

His father finished the lights and Biddy crawled underneath the lowest branches and plugged them in. He remained there, gazing up through the tangle at the artfully spaced colors. His parents circled the tree critically, replacing dead bulbs and exchanging a red for a green here or there to balance out the colors. He lay on his back on the rug, with pine needles poking his neck and tree-sap and wood smell filling the air. Danny Kaye was singing "The Little Drummer Boy." His eyes followed the trunk of the tree from branch to branch and from color to color. So many of his most cherished moments he forgot from year to year, he realized.

His father pulled on his foot. "Hey. Let's go. You pass away under there? Ornaments."

They circled the tree slowly, ornaments swaying from each hand and catching the lights on their curved surfaces. Space them out, his father told him. Look for the gaps in the branches.

He found himself considering Cindy and her lie in the sporting-goods store. The image of her at the moment of the lie nagged at him.

His sister came into the living room and turned the stereo down. "I can't hear my show," she said.

"We still have to get something for Michael and Sandy," his mother said. "And Cindy. What should we get for Cindy, Biddy?" She was concentrating on a clear ornament with a skiing scene inside.

"We can get her a gold chain or something," his father said. "We'll find something tomorrow."

"I don't know what's wrong with those two."

"Who?" Biddy asked.

"It doesn't concern you," his mother said.

"Cindy and Ronnie?"

"If you don't start hanging ornaments, we're going to put a lantern in your hand and stick you in the front yard," his father said.

Christmas was harder to stay with this year, he was noticing, harder to appreciate, to focus on. He set the ornament he held down on the stereo and lifted the tone arm on the turntable, interrupting "The Twelve Days of Christmas" and easing the needle back down with a crackle at the beginning of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing."

His mother woke him at seven the next morning. School had ended for Christmas break the day before, with grab-bag presents (he'd forgotten his and so hadn't been allowed to draw one) and a half day, but the choir needed a final practice, Sister felt, so they were meeting at 8:00 a.m. three days before Christmas to give it one final attempt. This choir was going to come together, Sister said, no matter what the naysayers thought.

They sat in the places they would occupy on Christmas Eve. The church was cold and dark and the chapel colder. There was very little enthusiasm, even for misbehaving. Sister quietly went through the program. The robes still hadn't arrived, but they could pick them up the day after tomorrow. Teddy sat behind him, pulling licorice sticks apart on his lap. Biddy put his hands behind his back for some. He tore off a piece, his eyes on Sister, and handed the rest back.

"You got it all sweaty," Teddy whispered in his ear.

The trick was to chew when he could and not let the licorice interfere with his voice when he couldn't.

They were two choruses into "Angels We Have Heard on High" when Sister said, "Stand up, Mr. Bell."

Biddy froze and Teddy stood, wobbling a bit, his jaws clamping down on the licorice.

"Sing it, mister," she said, and played the first few chords. Teddy began, with no chance of hiding the fact that something was in his mouth. Sister came over to him and took his chin in her hand and put her fingers in his mouth, to everyone's horror, moving them around until she had located the offending object and pulled it out.

"Eeyou," Sarah Alice said from the back, Sister or no, some of the others involuntarily echoing her, transfixed at the sight of the black goo dripping from the length of Sister's finger: "Eeyou, eeyou, eeyou."

"So how did Teddy Bell get himself kicked off the choir with three days to go?" Biddy's mother asked. She had the happy air of someone making her final shopping trip of the season. She settled herself, adjusting the front seat, while Biddy got in.

“How did you know that?” he said.

“His mother told me. He won’t tell her why.”

He put his hand over the dash, tracing dust. “He was eating licorice.”

“During practice?”

He nodded.

“That was all?”

“He was grossed out by her finger, too. She took it right out of his mouth.”

“Did he say anything?” They backed out of the driveway, the house edging past. “I can’t believe that was all he did. Three days before the Mass she gets rid of him?”

He shrugged. “She’ll take him back, I think. We were short even with him.”

There were two roads out of Lordship, both through the great salt marshes that isolated it from Bridgeport and Stratford. During the great hurricane of 1955, when the flood waters had risen ten to twelve feet, there had been no roads out of Lordship. On a map the peninsula hung southward into Long Island Sound like the tattered hem of a dress. To the west his father’s Burma Road connected directly to Bridgeport, passing south of the airport into Interstate 95. To the north, the route they followed, Stratford Road, led to Stratford, past Avco Lycoming Industries and, again, the airport. They drove in a lazy arc around one of the runways guarded by hurricane fences and lights, the tarmac freshly plowed and now stained by melting snow. The airport and all it was beginning to represent to him had been happily muffled somewhat in the last few days, and yet here it was, back again, parading before him and unwinding in a string of tarmac, lights, hangars, towers, and planes that seemed a kind of dark parody of temptation. And he realized that even if they’d taken the other route, the effect would have been the same: there was no way out of Lordship that did not run past the airport. The realization did nothing to lessen the feeling that something somewhere was steering his affairs.

He had been collecting information on Cessnas and how to fly them. It was a passing idea that was beginning to take shape and, like the sailboat that stormy afternoon, to thrust itself upon him.

His mother’s left turn through the terminal gates and into the parking area seemed additional confirmation. Enjoying his surprise, she explained only as they passed the hangars that they were meeting his father, who was putting in a half day and picking up a package for Sikorsky.

His father hadn’t arrived yet; they had to wait. Biddy sat facing the panorama of the winter airport, surprised at how relentlessly it

suggested itself to him. Piper Cubs and Cessnas were lined wing to wing toward the sun, the silver wings glinting over the cockpits and creating the illusion of a single long band of metal or a straight-edged frozen stream leading into the Sound and beyond. The snow edged the tarmac around them unevenly, stubby lights on the shoulders emerging here and there like winter growths.

To his right the tower rose on the other side of the runway, two stories high with a line of simple, oddly shaped antennae rising from its top. Nothing seemed to be moving. The enormous hangars shielded many of the aircraft parking areas from view, either from the tower or from the Bridgeport Flight Service. In the distance a bluff rose behind the far runway, surmounted by a fence that was the end of Birch Street. The small-scale geography was conspiring even there, he realized; the street he lived on was a dead end, leading to the airport.

His father's Buick pulled in a few spaces down. He held up one finger and went into the building nearest him.

"I don't know how your father ends up doing things like this," his mother said idly. "Mr. Nice Guy. They must have messengers or something. Fourteen years he works at the company, and he's picking up mail."

His father opened the door and Biddy almost toppled out. "Shove over," he said. "Let's go."

"You going to leave your car here?" his mother said.

"Sure. Otherwise we both go all the way home and all of that. … I'll pick it up on the way back. It's all right here. What is this, the South Bronx?"

They pulled out of the parking space and stopped at the gate for a break in the traffic.

"Someday I'll show you around," his father said. "It's a shame, we got the airport right here and you don't take advantage of it."

Biddy peered over his shoulder at the hangars, the wind sock in the distance, the planes. "We can come back," he said, feeling more and more as if the Cessnas were a kind of frightening, exhilarating last chance, or best chance. "I can find out more."

"Railroad Salvage," his father said when they arrived. "What are we doing at Railroad Salvage? What kind of *chiboni* shops for Christmas presents at Railroad Salvage?"

"Hibachis," his mother answered, shutting the car door. "They've got triple hibachis on sale. I thought we'd get one for Michael and Sandy."

"Hibachis."

"That's right." She walked ahead of them. "You didn't have any ideas."

“Hibachis,” his father repeated. They went inside.

Railroad Salvage was a cavernous warehouse piled high with great stacks of odd items that had flimsy red-and-green “Sale” signs perched over them. Merchandise was arranged as if it had been unloaded randomly from trucks: peanut butter next to snow tires, Fort Apache Play Sets beside cutting boards. Red-and-green streamers hung between steel beams on the roof. Above him a sign read CHRISTMAS CARNAVAL. It depressed him when adults couldn’t spell.

His parents had threaded their way to the hibachis and were handling one, moving the grills to higher and lower slots. They decided to get it.

The line at the cashier was discouragingly long. The woman in front of them had twelve jars of apricots and a wrench set. His mother wandered off and after a few minutes his father did as well. Biddy stood holding the hibachi with both hands, seeing with perfect clarity his eventual confrontation with an impassive cashier, his parents still missing and the line behind him growing restive and angry.

He could faintly hear a Christmas carol piped in above him, lost in the great noisy space of a giant metal box filled with bargain hunters. His mother reappeared beside him. “Where’d your father go?” she asked. “We still have to get something for Cindy. Then we’re through. There’s Ginnie.”

Ginnie was waiting in a line two rows down. She waved and hesitated, then relinquished her place in line and came over. She said something about the last minute.

“It’s terrible,” his mother said. “Every year I say I’m going to finish early, and there’s always someone you forget.”

“I was looking for a vaporizer for Dom’s mother,” Ginnie said. “Of course they sold out. They probably had two.”

“How’s Cindy?”

Ginnie rearranged the packages in her arms. “They have some sort of bug up their ass. Every time I turn around, they’re not talking or one of them’s mad about something. They’re supposed to be getting married in a few months. You figure it.”

“Well, you get nervous. It’s a big step.”

“I don’t know. I thought you were supposed to fight after you got married, not before.”

He attempted to be as inconspicuous as possible, seemingly absorbed in the gums along the checkout counter, but they changed the subject. He hefted the hibachi higher, against his chest.

His father arrived after they’d checked through and said hello and goodbye to Ginnie, ushering them to the car. They drove to the Trumbull shopping mall. “So what are we going to get her?” his mother said.

"What about a chain?"

"She's got a lot of chains," Biddy said.

"How about a nice sweater?"

"She said she doesn't need a sweater." They both looked at him. "When we were looking for a sweater for Ronnie."

"Okay." His father fiddled with the radio. "You're in charge then, if you're the expert on Cindy. Check Read's first and pick out something and show us. I want to show your mother something anyway."

When they arrived, his father gestured vaguely at the front of the store, saying to meet them in Housewares, and to see if he could stay under twenty dollars.

He wandered through Ladies Lingerie, the For Her Shop, and Junior Miss, sure that in his ignorance he was bypassing perfect gift after perfect gift. He finally stopped at the perfume counter, drawn to the octagonal island terraced with colored bottles. He peered at the yellow Chanel bottles.

"Can I help you?" a woman said.

He found his parents twenty minutes later, eyeing a sink.

"What'd you come up with?" his father said. "Perfume?"

His mother took the red case in her hands. "Cinnabar? That's nice."

"You don't give a girl perfume," his father said. "That's like something Ronnie would give her."

"A sales slip," his mother said. "You already bought this?"

"I had some money," he said. His parents looked at each other, and his mother shrugged. "Well, we'll pay you back, that's all. Unless you want to give it to her all by yourself. Then we still have to get her something."

"Perfume," his father said. "We'll give her something from Frederick's of Hollywood next."

"Oh, leave him alone," his mother said. "I think it's nice."

When they got home, he finished putting tinsel on the tree, a job his parents always considered his and his alone, in some sort of effort, he sensed, to pretend he was capable of separate but equal responsibilities: Dad cuts the tree, lays in the wiring; Biddy hangs the tinsel. Still, he enjoyed it — he enjoyed any sort of work on the Christmas tree, except stripping it — and he stood beside it, hanging the thin, fluttering silver strips from branch to branch, the main body of tinsel he was drawing from draped over his arm like a maître d's linen.

The sun was going down, the sky gray and blue with a bit of orange showing behind the houses to the west. His sister was out. His

parents were in the den and the bedroom. More Christmas carols were on the stereo: Nat King Cole soothing his way through “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.” The dog lay sprawled on its side near the tree, rear legs twitching occasionally to the rhythms of a dream. And Biddy was luxuriating in the silence and the time it took to insure an even distribution of tinsel on a Christmas tree. By the time he was finished, he was standing in a thick gloom, the windows liquid with the twilight, and he paused to survey the tree in its lesser glory, shimmering feebly in the darkened room, before crouching low and plugging in its lights.

The effect was, as it was every year, breathtaking. The silver strips became filaments of chrome reflecting, refracting, quadrupling the orange, red, blue, and green lights. The tree was a masterpiece of decorative symmetry, of warmth, and of as much tradition as a thirteen-year-old could invest it with. He sat back on the sofa slowly, a celebrant, his eyes on the tree, its lights mirrored in the darkened glass of the picture window behind it. Stupid shook and drooled.

He listened to “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” the notes of the melody ringing soft and clear on the stereo. He was happy, and knew enough by now not to question it. He realized with some surprise that the Vikings had made a run at the playoffs and fallen short almost without attracting his notice. He’d picked up the sketchy outline of what had happened here and there, and it hadn’t bothered him. They seemed very distant, as if, like the Orioles, they were out of season. At times during the days right before Christmas, the world didn’t seem to be pushing in on him as much, and such things as the Vikings were not as necessary or important.

The kind of respite the Christmas season afforded, he was beginning to realize, was something he counted on, and could count on every year. It was as important as ever this year, if not more so, since talismans as disparate as Cindy and Louis and the Vikings were threatening to lose their power, and the alternatives he would be left with frightened him. Sports would not be enough, he knew, even as he knew Christmas would not last forever. Beyond the end of his street he could imagine the lights of the airport, twinkling cold and clear in the darkness.

“Clean up some of the mess on the floor,” his father called from the bedroom. “The Carvers are coming over later.”

The silence hissed and crackled on the stereo. Mr. Carver was coming to answer all questions and keep the answers preeminent in his mind, to dog him through whatever hesitations or barriers he threw up, to penetrate the charmed circles of Advent and Christmas.

His books were upstairs, dog-eared and marked heavily with underlinings and marginalia. Mr. Carver was coming. Questions that

had been problems would be dealt with. On his hands and knees he raked the loose tinsel from the rug, piling it with the unused portion, turned off the tree, and went upstairs to prepare.

Put the book away and come say hello to the Carvers, his father told him. And call his sister.

The Carvers were having a drink in front of the tree when he brought her down.

"It's a beautiful tree," Mrs. Carver said.

It had a nice shape to it, Mr. Carver agreed.

His father opened the interview for him. "Bill, you still taking the Cessna in to work, or what?"

"Very, very rarely in the winter."

"I can't imagine coming to work by plane every day," Biddy's mother said.

It wasn't that expensive, Mr. Carver said. And the time difference was significant.

"How long's it take to drive?"

"Three and a half hours. That's opposed to a ten-minute flight."

"That's right," his mother said. "He has to go all the way into the city and back out."

"You take the Long Island Expressway?" his father asked.

"The L.I.E. to 95, yes."

"I just think it's quite a way to begin and end a day, flying," his mother said.

Carver nodded and sipped his drink.

"When will you be flying again?" Biddy asked.

Mr. Carver peered over at him, mildly surprised at what Biddy realized was an interruption of a sort. "Oh, I expect I'll be going again when the weather gets better." He shifted comfortably in his chair. "The cold I don't mind, but there's no sense fighting everything else."

He pressed ahead into the silence, feeling incautious but emboldened by his earlier, still resonating impression of having glimpsed a mechanism of events beginning to take shape. "Which is harder, taking off or landing?"

"Oh, landing," Carver said without hesitation, and didn't elaborate. The conversation drifted to other things and dinner was announced. The beef was praised lavishly, though he saw nothing special in it. Afterward the adults slumped in their chairs, lazy with four courses, after-dinner drinks, and coffee. Carols played quietly on the stereo.

He sat at Carver's feet at the base of the tree. His father seemed lost in the songs, a drink on his thigh; his mother spoke quietly with Mrs. Carver across the room. He asked about the takeoff checklist. He

asked about yaw and cruising range. And finally, when he sensed Carver's attention focusing on the glitter of the ornaments spread before him like the watch fob of a hypnotist, he asked about airport security.

The adults' argument over nuclear war later that evening raised the possibility in his mind that in fact what he had been doing was simply stockpiling all this information, and although it was being stockpiled there was no inevitability, necessarily, in its ever being used. He drew a double line under the last of the questions that had been answered and shut the note pad and put it away, the Cessna closer than ever and having to wait for the weather. He released the image from his concentration, resolving halfheartedly to give Christmas its chance.

The next night, Mickey was his official guest. The visit wasn't his idea; they hadn't said more than a few words to each other since Thanksgiving. Mickey had never explained his earlier behavior and Biddy had long since lost the energy to press for an explanation. Dom and Ginnie were making an annual Christmas trip to Pittsfield to visit friends. Mickey, who hated the trip, was being allowed to stay with the Sieberts, who, Biddy was sure, had only occurred to him in a moment of desperation. Cindy had gotten out of the trip as well, he'd related indignantly to Biddy over the phone, claiming she had other friends to see upstate, near Hartford, so there was no reason he should have to go. Louis alone was going. Long car trips never bothered him, and he bore all strangers and distant relations with equanimity.

They played Nerf Basketball and War and Sports Illustrated Football and then, although he'd never shown anyone else the game and hadn't touched the dice in months himself, he tried dice baseball. Mickey was bored in minutes and lost interest by the fifth inning.

"This game sucks," he said. "You got anything else? You got Atari?"

Biddy shook his head. There was nothing on television, either.

"I got Stratamatic Baseball," Mickey said, without enthusiasm. "Wanna play that?"

Biddy felt himself a host, his guest's happiness his responsibility. Mickey's boredom was his failure. "Sure," he said.

It was at his house. Biddy protested his parents would never let them out so late, but Mickey interrupted impatiently that they would just say they were going out in the yard, to build a snow fort or something. Biddy relented, and after some discussion his parents did as well.

They walked along the road in single file, the wind cold and the

snow crunching in the moonlight. The sky seemed a deep blue curtain in the distance over the airport. The plan was to pick up the game and return, pretending Mickey had had it all along.

There seemed to be no cars on the road, nothing stirring.

"It's so quiet," he murmured.

"Yeah." Mickey took it as a complaint.

"Won't your door be locked?"

"There's an extra key in the garage."

They scraped on in silence. Powdery snow drifted across ice and pavement like sand on a dune. They could hear the hiss of snow tires on a nearby street. He was bundled and secure in his coat.

They turned onto Ryegate Terrace and Mickey said, "Someone's home."

A warm, feeble light was visible in the downstairs bedroom.

"Ronnie's here," Biddy said. His car was behind Cindy's.

"My sister, too. What a liar." Mickey wiped his nose with a mitten, the smear across it shining under the streetlight. "We should spy on them." He seemed to have no interest in the idea.

They came up the driveway quietly and Mickey tested the door. "It's unlocked," he said. He creaked it open. It occurred to Biddy while he waited that something shameful or illicit or exciting might be going on, but the door was swinging open and he followed Mickey in.

They could make out Ronnie at the kitchen table, his finger to his lips. He wasn't moving.

"What are you doing in the dark?" Mickey whispered, quieted more by the lack of light than by Ronnie's gesture.

"Be quiet," Ronnie said. A radio was softly playing in another room. They came into the kitchen soundlessly. Ronnie still hadn't moved, frozen in his chair. His voice came out of the darkness like a recording. "What're you doing here?"

"Came to get a game," Mickey said faintly. "Where's Cindy?"

"Go get it. Go upstairs. Don't make a sound."

Mickey edged past him into the hallway and disappeared.

"You too," he said. Biddy couldn't see his eyes. "Get out of here. Go upstairs."

"What's wrong?" The whispering, the sitting in the dark, the tone of Ronnie's voice scared him.

"Go upstairs."

Biddy slipped past him through the hallway and into the living room, shrinking into the shadows against the wall. He could make out other noises in the bedroom as well as the radio, but they were muffled and intermittent.

Ronnie was still perfectly silent. The pendulum of the clock near him clicked steadily. Finally there was the slightest noise, of the chair

on the linoleum floor, and the faint clatter of the cutlery drawer being opened. Something was slid out, the sound like that of a single stroke of a knife on a sharpening steel.

Biddy waited, the only sounds coming from the bedroom. When he couldn't bear it any longer he eased forward and was about to peek around the corner into the kitchen when Ronnie moved noiselessly past, their faces only inches apart, with the wall between them. He disappeared down the hall. After a moment Biddy followed, amazed at himself. The hall closet door was slightly ajar and he slipped behind it, his feet nudging aside clothes baskets and boxes of detergent on the floor. He edged in until, leaning on the inside wall, he could peer out of the crack under the hinge between the door and the jamb.

Ronnie stood framed in his vision, pausing at the bedroom door. His hand was closed around the knob. The noises inside were more distinct now and Biddy could distinguish Cindy's murmurs. Ronnie had a knife in his hand.

He realized it with a shock — Ronnie had a knife in his hand, ten inches, twelve inches long. Leaning there in the dark, with an eye screwed to the crack between door and wall and one foot on the other to avoid moving anything else on the floor, he had a sudden horrifying sense of something inconceivable about to happen, and before he could cry out or even react fully Ronnie turned the handle and threw the door open, the light flooding into the hall until he moved into the doorway to block it.

"Oh, my God," Cindy said.

There was no other sound. The radio was switched off. Ronnie was perfectly still. Biddy strained to see what was going on, moving his eye up and down the crack in terror and suspense.

"Why don't you just pull right out, trooper." Ronnie's voice was low and even and terrifying. "Don't even bother to wipe the goo off. Get up."

The bed squeaked and someone's leg appeared beyond his silhouette.

"Get your car keys." Ronnie still hadn't moved. There was a jingling of a belt buckle and coins. He gestured past Biddy down the hall, the sudden motion startling. "Get out."

The other man said something, his voice low, as frightened as Biddy would have been.

"Touch those clothes and I'll cut your pecker off. Get out."

The man said something about pants.

"Get out." Ronnie's voice was indescribable: Biddy was momentarily certain that if he was discovered he'd be killed as well.

The man popped through the doorway abruptly, naked, his penis gleaming before Biddy could look away: the man in the store, Sean.

Ronnie followed him down the hall, and the back door opened and slammed shut. Biddy imagined the man standing naked in the driveway, bare feet on the ice.

In the bedroom he saw Cindy's naked thigh, her arms struggling with a pair of pants. The closet door swung open. Ronnie loomed above him, the knife pointed at the floor. Biddy froze, breath changing direction in his throat. "All right, get out of here," Ronnie said. "The show's over." He called Mickey, his raised voice the first loud noise in the house.

Biddy scrambled from the closet, intercepting Mickey in the kitchen in his rush to the door.

"What's going on?" Mickey said. "Did Cindy leave?" Biddy shook his head, unable to speak. "I couldn't find all the pieces to the Stratamatic." Mickey opened the back door and stepped out. "I should tell my parents those two were here when they weren't supposed to be."

He continued to talk, and at the corner Biddy collapsed to a sitting position and refused to get up, mired, it seemed, in the ice and snow, not responding, tears filling his eyes and the cold and wet coming through his pants, until Mickey gave up in exasperation and left, disappearing in the direction of Biddy's home, leaving him alone and soaked in the rear with the night closing in around him.

"Biddy's sitting in the road and he won't get up," Mickey announced after taking off his mittens in the Sieberts' kitchen.

His father arrived in minutes, the dark Buick pulling up next to him and sliding a little in its haste to stop. He wouldn't respond to questions and his father, impatient, frightened, and despairing, finally picked him up, Biddy as quiescent as a drunk or baby, and carried him into the car. All he was able to say was "Nothing" in response to their questions of what was wrong, what had happened. Mickey was almost no help. Biddy was put to bed. Mickey was put in front of the television. Kristi stayed in the living room, shooting at ornaments with a rubber band. His parents huddled outside his room debating in fierce whispers what should be done. His mother wanted to call Dr. Hanzlik here, now, this minute, get him out of bed if they had to. His father favored waiting until after Christmas: Hanzlik probably wouldn't see him until then anyway, and why ruin everyone's Christmas? And who knew what was wrong? Who knew how serious it was? Maybe he'd seen another three-legged dog, for all they knew.

Finally, in whispers that grew calmer, they got hold of themselves and decided they'd wait until after the holidays.

Before she went to bed, Kristi poked her head into his room, a

crack of light from the hall spreading across the floor.

"Are you sick?" she said.

He lay under his covers like an exhausted Channel swimmer.

"They say to leave you alone." She stepped a bit farther in, the hall light slanting across her cheek, catching on her hair. "Cindy called you. They said you were sick and couldn't come to the phone."

He lay as if asleep.

"Are you gonna get real sick right before Christmas?"

He opened his eyes at the worry in her voice, and raised his head. "You don't want me to get sick?" he asked quietly.

She sat on the edge of the bed. "No."

They remained where they were. The furnace kicked on in the cellar.

She rubbed her leg. "Know what I got you for Christmas?"

He shook his head, his hair making soft noises against the pillow. "Where's Mickey?"

"They got him downstairs in the living room. He says you have a nervous breakdown."

He shook his head again. "I don't have a nervous breakdown."

In the near darkness he could see her picking self-consciously or abstractedly at the covers. "Mickey said you wouldn't get off the road." He shifted under the covers. "Are you okay?"

"Uh-huh."

"If I did that they'd kill me."

He let it go.

"The Sisters say I should be nicer to you." She waited, the air audible now in the heating vents. "Do they say that to you?"

He wiped his nose on the covers. "They say that to everybody."

She rose to leave. "I hope you're not sick. If you're still sick tomorrow, I'll ask if we can eat up here."

"Thanks. That'd be good," he said, and she closed the door behind her, her hair under the light as beautiful as he had ever seen it before the black door shut it out.

"Get out of bed, pal. You may not have any Christmas spirit but you got some singing to do." His father stripped the bed of blankets and sheet with one pull, leaving him a fish on a beach, foolish and exposed. The cool air chilled his feet.

"Let's go. Your Aunt Rosie's coming over and you're not receiving visitors in bed."

He had been in bed all day this Christmas Eve. Cindy had called again, his sister had had jelly sandwiches with him on a TV tray for lunch, and his father had gone over to the school to pick up his choir robe. His mother had come up to talk with him while she was baking.

His father decided enough was enough forty-five minutes before company was due to arrive.

"You see your Aunt Rosie twice a year," he said. "You can make a little effort. You can only take this *Camille* bit so far."

His Aunt Rosie was actually his mother's aunt, who lived in upstate New York and came down to visit that part of the family in Connecticut — her nieces' families — twice a year, at Thanksgiving and Christmas. This year she had missed Thanksgiving. She would see everyone at Christmas, she'd said. And besides, who wanted to drive all the way up there, pick her up, and take her back? She was in her nineties and had come over from Naples fifty-three years earlier and was still convinced her stay in America was only temporary.

She never had pretended to understand any of the children, but Judy's Eustace was another story altogether. From start to finish: What kind of name was Biddy? Or Eustace, for that matter? And he was always standing around like a *chidrule*. He never ate. You could count his ribs. He was a nice boy and he gave them nothing but worries.

Biddy stood in the shower, soaping up. His father was shaving and singing "The First Noël." In the living room his mother was vacuuming and the stereo was playing "Buona Natale," from a Jimmy Roselli Christmas album. Kristi was watching *Miracle on 34th Street* in the den, with the volume turned up. Rather than mixing, the sounds were fighting with each other for his attention, snatches of one, then the other, dominating.

His father grinned at him when he came into the kitchen dripping and barefoot, hoping to coax him into the same hearty good humor by example. His mother was levering red-and-beige cookies off a metal sheet with a spatula. He rubbed his arm dry, his wet hair stiff and cold on his neck.

"Look at him. He's got the weight of the world on his shoulders," his father teased.

"Your clothes are laid out upstairs," his mother said. "What time did Sister say to be over there?" He could sense their anxiety in the tone of her voice: what if he refused to respond and continued to refuse to respond? He had an unpleasant feeling of power. "Eleven-thirty," he said, and headed obediently for the stairs.

Rose arrived a few minutes later in a welter of greetings and warnings about icy steps. She leaned on Michael's arm, and one by one they kissed her. Biddy still didn't look good, Kristi was getting bigger and bigger, and what had Judy done to her hair?

"I cut it, Rosie," his mother said. "I want it off the face. I don't want to have to worry about it for a while."

Rose suggested she looked like a feminist.

Michael and Sandy brought the presents into the living room and piled them under the tree. They'd driven Rosie down the day before, and were now taking her from relative to relative on her Christmas tour. They looked tired already.

She was led into the living room and settled into a chair near the tree while his father put on his Mario Lanza record, a Christmas tradition when she visited. It was not a Christmas album, but Rose didn't have a stereo and Mario Lanza held a place in her personal pantheon, his father said, just a notch or two below the Holy Ghost. Her hearing was still sharp. She'd just have a little of the homemade white wine she'd brought, they shouldn't bother over her, sit down, relax. Mario Lanza sang "My Buddy." To Biddy it always sounded like "My Body."

"What about this one?" Rosie asked, gesturing toward Kristi, who was edging her present back and forth on the rug with her toe as if movement might reveal its nature. "How's she been?"

His mother sipped her drink, which was a rich honey color in the warm lights of the lamp and tree. "She's been okay. You know. Stubborn as ever."

"She's the scourge of the nuns," his father said. "She has them living in fear." Michael and Sandy chuckled, and Kristi rocked back and forth, pleased with the attention.

"What about Biddy?" Rose said. "Has he been behaving?"

Both his parents hesitated and his father set down his drink. "We had a little excitement yesterday." He gestured toward her with his head. "Tell Rosie what you did yesterday."

Biddy looked into her eyes.

"He sat down over on Ryegate Terrace over here last night and—"

"Where?"

"Over here on Ryegate Terrace, where the Lirianos live, and he decided he wouldn't get up."

"He couldn't get up?"

"He wouldn't get up."

It took some additional discussion to make it clear to her what they meant. Once she had it clear in her mind, she looked at him, baffled. "Why wouldn't he get up?"

"He won't tell us. Maybe the world grew too heavy on his shoulders. I had to pick him up in my car."

"What're you, cuckoo?" Rose said, concerned.

Biddy managed a smile.

"You're cuckoo sometimes," she decided.

"I think he saw another hurt dog," his father said. "Is that what it was?"

"I didn't see any dog."

“Are you going to be able to go to midnight Mass with us?” his mother asked. “Biddy’s in the choir this year.”

“I heard,” Rose said. “Sandy and Michael told me.”

“Sister said his voice is just like an angel’s.”

“It’s pretty icy out, Rose,” Michael said.

“I’m going to go,” she said. “If Sandy and Michael can wait around.”

Sandy and Michael, sagging noticeably, said that would be fine.

She requested that Biddy sit next to her at dinner, whether to show he was favored or to keep a closer eye on him he wasn’t sure. She tried a bit of everything that was put on the table: fennel and black olives, prosciutto and melon, turkey and turnips, mashed potatoes, stuffing, yams in syrup, broccoli. She spooned out his portions besides, claiming if he’d *mangia* a little more he wouldn’t look like such a ghost. She waved her hand slightly and shook her head, chewing. “Yesterday on Mervin Griffin they got two women in love,” she said. “Two women in love. You believe that?”

“No, Rose, they were kidding you,” Michael said. “They were just friends.”

“Two women in love.” She gave up, appalled either way.

Dessert was anisette cookies and coffee, of which he had two cups since he was singing in the choir.

Afterward they returned to the living room and the tree, all of them directing Michael as he resat Rosie. His mother talked with Sandy about the President, whom they considered a fool. Michael asked his father what the heating bills had been like that winter. Kristi lay with her head under the tree, inert. He was left with Rose, who watched him every so often as if, sitting at her feet in front of the Christmas tree, he might betray what had prompted him to refuse to get off an icy street the evening before.

“You looking forward to singing tonight?” she asked. Her hair was white and uneven and her skin hung in soft folds beneath her neck. “You nervous?”

He shrugged.

“What are you gonna sing?”

He went back over his songs, remembering bits of the practice sessions: “‘Joy to the World!’ ‘Angels We Have Heard on High,’ ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful,’ ‘Silent Night,’ and ‘Hark! the Herald Angels Sing.’”

She fidgeted and asked if he’d had enough to eat.

He assured her that he had. He’d never had so much mashed potatoes, he added as proof.

She smiled. “You know who used to love mashed potatoes? Your grandfather. We used to fight over the mashed potatoes when he’d

come over for dinner. You know what he'd do? He'd take his false teeth out, like a *cavone,* right there at the table, and throw them into the bowl, and ask, 'Anybody want any potatoes?'"

Biddy laughed.

"Of course we didn't. We just learned, that's all. Make two bowls when your grandfather came over." She smiled again and rubbed the top of his head. "You going to come up and see me in Albany?"

He agreed to if his parents came up. "Are you okay? They said you were sick around Thanksgiving."

"They worry too much. I tell them, I'm ninety-two. Very few people die at ninety-two." She gave him a sip of her anisette.

At eleven he went upstairs to change. His mother had laid out a white shirt, black tie, and black pants on the bed. His father had polished his black shoes to a high gloss. He put everything on and combed his hair in the upstairs bathroom, wetting down one area that stuck up stubbornly and holding his hand over it.

When he returned there was a good deal of talk concerning how sharp he looked, Rose remarking on it three or four times. His father dug the choir robe out of the hall closet, and he tried it on for the benefit of those assembled. It was scarlet and pleated at the shoulders, billowing out at the arms. The fit was perfect, the hem brushing his shoe tops. He took it off and stuffed it back in the box. As he left, they called "Good luck" from the kitchen and the living room.

The room off the sacristy where the altar boys changed was six feet or so by fifteen, with a good three feet of that width taken up by cassocks and hanger space, and when he arrived all the boys in the choir — eight of them besides himself — were crammed in shoulder to shoulder, arms swinging and pivoting, trying to climb into their robes. The walls, which were unpainted cement, echoed the giggles and whispers back at them, and magnified the musical crash of metal hangers on the floor. He noticed Teddy, apparently reinstated, without surprise. Teddy's robe didn't fit; it hung just below his knees. His pants stopped just above his ankles, producing a silly, tiered effect. "I shoulda looked at it when I picked it up," he said. "Or I shouldn'ta come back. Now I look like a retard."

Father poked his head in and whispered to quiet down, and there was a good deal of accidental and intended slapping while they tried to get their arms into their sleeves. Someone hit the forty-watt bulb above them and it swayed back and forth, swinging shadows across their faces and producing an effect worthy of a horror film. "Curse of Dracula," Teddy said. They all made what they believed to be horror-film sounds, and Father had to poke his head in again.

Once ready, they lined up in the sacristy proper to wait for the

girls. “We gotta dress in a closet and he gets all this,” Teddy whispered into his ear.

Father stood before them in a white chasuble, with thick gold bands forming a cross from shoulder to shoulder and neck to hem, INRI printed at the apex inlaid with black and gold. The gold seemed impossibly rich and provoked a kind of reverence in all of them. The door leading to the spare rooms in back creaked open and Sister led the girls in, most of them looking prettier than any of the boys would have thought physically possible. Laura slipped by him, her brushed hair golden brown over the scarlet shoulders of her robe. Sister checked the formation one final time before she left them, with a nod intended to inspire confidence, and took her place at the organ. When it swelled to life, Father finally broke into a smile and said, “Merry Christmas. And sing your brains out.” He turned and took a measured step down and out of the sacristy, and they followed in a controlled mass, hands clasped in front of them as Sister had instructed.

They were singing as the congregation rose to greet them, the pews thundering dully, and they filed down the side aisle past the familiar faces of friends, relatives, and neighbors. The entrance hymn was “Joy to the World!” and Biddy was only aware of singing it halfway into the second chorus. From the side they turned up the center aisle, Christ high on his cross above them and never closer, red and white poinsettias flanking the altar like a Christmas jungle, gold everywhere and glittering with the candlelight and occasion: candlesticks, chalices, water and wine vessels, the tabernacle. They stepped up from outer to inner altar, turned in pairs past Sister to the right, and filed into the choir pews as if they’d grown up filing into choir pews. After one more chorus the singing stopped. The lay reader announced — because of the special treat of a real choir this year — a second entrance hymn, number 36 in the missalettes: “Angels We Have Heard on High.” As they rose to sing he glanced down the row of faces alongside him with a growing happiness and pride that one could only begin to feel when singing, and singing well when it wasn’t expected, in a makeshift choir on Christmas Eve. His voice rose as the highest and strongest soprano, with Teddy and Sarah Alice’s right beside it, supporting, and the others ranging alongside in chorus. They were a unit singing as a part of a celebration separate from Sister and Father and even the Mass, and yet privy to it in a more wonderful way because of that separation. He led everyone in the song through the soaring eighteen-note expansion of the Gloria and the supporting In Excelsis Deo, and back through the Gloria again, to finish by expanding the supporting phrase in a final cadence: *“In Excelsis De-e-eo.”*

They sat down.

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.” Now more than ever he wanted to be in tune with the mechanism of the Mass, to see and appreciate all that had during the year for one reason or another cruised effortlessly by him while he stood oblivious in the pews. But even as they spoke the opening prayer together, he could see that the magic did not extend to all aspects of the Mass; that only the songs and the night itself would be different and so then memorable, and that would be enough. Alone, either was a great deal more magic than he had bargained for. In a vague way he wondered if it might be capable of producing some sort of change in him, and he wondered if that was what he had been hoping for all along.

Laura glanced back at him from the front row, and he smiled. They stood and sat and knelt as a group, and recited the prayers crisply without the usual murmuring and trailing off at the end, and Mass continued to glide by seamlessly.

“Be seated,” Father said. “A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Luke.”

“Glory to you, O Lord.”

He shifted at the podium, and began.

“Now it came to pass in those days that a decree went forth from Caesar Augustus that a census of the whole world be taken. This first census took place while Cyrinus was governor of Syria. And all were going, each to his own town, to register. And Joseph also went from Galilee out of the town of Nazareth into Judea to the town of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to register, together with Mary his espoused wife, who was with child.

“And it came to pass while they were there that the days for her to be delivered were fulfilled. And she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them at the inn.

“And there were shepherds in the same district living in the fields and keeping watch over their flocks by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood by them, and the glory of God shone round them, and they were much afraid.

“And the angel said unto them: ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be unto all people, for today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you, who is Christ the Lord.’…

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will.’”

Father closed the book with a quiet slap. “This is the Word of the Lord.”

Biddy sat transfixed, murmuring with the rest, “Thanks be to God.”

The Homily went by unnoticed, an uneven drift of words in the distance. His mind stayed out with the flocks in the darkness under the ancient night sky, with the shepherds and stars and angel who spoke so beautifully that to his complete surprise the Gospel, of all things, had provided something as vivid as the Orioles or the Vikings and a rough hillside thousands of miles and years away had become as familiar and comforting as Three Rivers Stadium or the Oriole dugout.

It was not a moment to rush through. He stood for the Profession of Faith a second later than the others, the first moment he was aware of when the choir was not in complete synchronization.

And as he recited, he did believe: in one God, the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen. In Jesus, in his crucifixion, in the rest of the prayer, which grew progressively harder to keep concrete, to keep meaningful, until, as always, he felt even in his faith a lack of faith, a nagging conviction that he didn’t believe hard enough.

Father had begun the Liturgy of the Eucharist and was preparing the host: “The day before he suffered, he took bread in his sacred hands, and looking up to heaven to you, his Almighty Father, he gave you thanks and praise. He broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: ‘Take this, all of you, and eat it: this is my body which will be given up for you.’” Biddy knelt without moving, lost in thought, and found himself mouthing along: “When the supper was ended, he took the cup. Again he gave you thanks and praise, gave the cup to his disciples, and said: ‘Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all men so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me.’”

He sat back, wishing he could understand, as Father rang the prayer to a close. Upon the final lines the choir stood together, relieved and moved, bored and distracted, to sing the answering Amen.

The Our Father followed. They gave each other the Sign of Peace. Down the bench Teddy farted, trying to muffle it. Father said, “This is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,” and Biddy, hoping somehow that it would help and knowing that he was wholeheartedly sincere in at least this prayer, said, “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.”

They sang “Silent Night” while the congregation received Communion. When the song was finished and the choir filed out of the pews to receive as well, the congregation, unsure of its new

singing responsibilities with the addition of a choir, began haltingly to start a new verse before petering out and leaving only the shifting sounds in the pews to accompany the quiet dialogue between celebrant and communicant, not quite lost in the hush: " … The Body of Christ. … Amen." His mouth full of the dry tasteless wafer, he sat down, his eyes closed until the saliva could break it down.

There were more prayers, and suddenly they were all standing for the concluding blessing. Father said, "The Lord be with you," and the response was the most wholehearted, the most enthusiastic of the Mass, as it always was: "And also with you." "The Mass is ended. Go in Peace." "Thanks be to God." And Sister looked at them over her shoulder from the organ and nodded as her hands began "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing."

Biddy sang. He sang as he never had before and perhaps never would again, realizing the song had always been his favorite, realizing it to be the perfect song with its power and joy to appear here to end the ceremony, to send them out into the snow and Christmas: *"Joyful, all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies, with the angelic host proclaim, 'Christ is born in Bethlehem!' Hark! the herald angels sing, 'Glory to the newborn King!'"*

There was another chorus but the congregation thundered into the aisles, leaving only the choir and Sister to appreciate it. And with small knots of parents remaining, clustered at the main doors, they sang the final notes and turned to one another in exhilaration, grinning and clapping congratulatory hands on shoulders.

Sister stood away from the organ and said, "You were just wonderful. Merry Christmas to you all. I'm proud of you."

Their ranks broke with a whoop, and he wished them all Merry Christmas — Sarah Alice, Teddy, Janet — trying to catch them before they disappeared into the chaos. Laura hugged him. She wished him a Merry Christmas and swept down the central aisle to her parents, leaning forward with their arms out at the main doors.

They found him still at his seat: his mother, Rose, Sandy, and Michael. The altar boys were moving swiftly back and forth extinguishing candles, anxious to get home. "You were wonderful," his mother said. "Did you see us over on the left?" He hadn't. Everyone agreed the choir had been marvelous. Rose kissed his cheek, a glancing blow, and it occurred to him she was happy her talk had turned him around. His mother asked what they were waiting for.

"I'll be right there," he said. "I just want to do something."

She offered to wait but he said he wanted to talk to Father. They said they'd go on ahead in that case, and left, wrapping coats and mufflers around themselves and hunching forward as they passed through the main doors. Michael brought the car around for Rose.

Biddy could see the snow coming down beyond. A noise from the sacristy intruded, and he turned and slipped into the second choir pew. He lay back along the bench seat gazing up at the ceiling beams brightly lit from below. He could hear odd metallic and wooden noises, as well as the rustle of Father's chasuble as he bustled around the church preparing to leave. When the noise grew very close, he knew Father was taking a last look in the chapel, and suddenly the lights went out, leaving only the glow from the sacristy coming over the horizon of pews like a yellow sunset. When the door shut, the light disappeared, leaving him in darkness. He imagined he could hear the snow piling up outside. An outer door swung shut with a much heavier sound, and he sat up.

It was already Christmas. Probably near one-thirty. He couldn't see his watch. There was a faint light coming in the rose window at the end of the nave. He could smell the smoke of the candles. As his eyes adjusted, he could make out the lines of pews, silent in the dark. He started to sing.

It was very quiet at first: "*Hark! the herald angels sing*," and then his voice grew louder and he sang it all the way through, once, and fell silent, listening to the church.

"Merry Christmas," he said finally, his voice almost a whisper, the sound taking flight in the darkness.

He woke with Stupid on the bed and Kristi pulling at his mouth. "Come on," she said unnecessarily. "It's Christmas."

He got a tent. An EMS Explorer, extremely light and compact, rolling up to the size of a football. A mess kit. A big flashlight. A ground cloth. A compass. He had to be reminded he had other presents to unwrap.

When they were finished, his father returned to the kitchen and started cracking eggs into a big bowl. He stacked the shells inside each other and they looked like a fat necklace or smooth caterpillar.

"Thanks for the hot-lather machine," he said when Biddy came up to the counter next to him. "Did you expect so much camping stuff?"

Biddy lifted the line of shells delicately, from both ends. "No."

"Well, in the summer you can take advantage of them. Get some use out of them."

The phone rang. Teddy said, "What'd you get?" when he picked it up. They each listed the highlights.

"Teddy got Atari," he said when he hung up. His father was swirling eggs around the pan with a plastic spatula.

"Good for Teddy. Just what a kid needs — something to keep him in front of a television," he said. "Come and eat something. Then you can play for a while, but we're going over the Lirianos' at noon."

What was there to do? He didn't want to see Cindy again. He couldn't believe he hadn't realized this would pop up in the middle of his Christmas, like a horrible bug found under his pillow. He sat in a living-room chair gazing past the tree to the snow outside, and his father appeared before him, half his face covered with lather.

"You stare out more windows than I don't know who," he said. "Are you going to get dressed?"

Upstairs he chose the same clothes he'd worn the night before. He couldn't refuse to visit the Lirianos. And he realized as he pulled his pants on that he didn't want to, for the same reason he'd found himself listening with special care to his parents' conversations around the house the last few days: he still hadn't completely deciphered what had happened, and he wanted to know.

He hesitated before entering their living room, causing Dom to inquire whether he had passed away in the hall. He came in and found sanctuary on the sofa, concentrating on their tree. It was smaller, decorated more carelessly. Presents were jumbled around it, Mickey's strewn in an arc across the room.

Gifts were exchanged. Only Louis was present. Mickey was already at a friend's house. "Someone got Atari," Dom said. "And the kid found out. We don't expect him back until Tuesday."

"Where's Cindy?" his father said.

"She's upstairs. Cindy!" he called. "She'll be right down."

They unwrapped gifts, thanked each other, and held them up for all to see. Biddy opened his and pulled out a Viking jersey.

"See the number?" Dom said. "Fifty-nine."

"What's fifty-nine?" his mother said.

"Who's fifty-nine, Biddy?" Dom asked.

Biddy folded it up. "Matt Blair," he said.

The Lirianos received a knife block. "Great," Dom said, hefting it. "We don't have to cut our hands to ribbons in the knife drawer anymore."

Cindy still hadn't appeared. "Cindy!" Biddy's mother called. "C'mon. You got two presents to open this year."

His eyes widened in horror. His parents had gotten their own present.

"Where's Ronnie, anyway?" his mother said.

"Don't ask," Ginnie said.

Cindy came downstairs in a royal-blue robe with yellow embroidery on the shoulders. She glanced at Biddy first and smiled and wished everyone a Merry Christmas.

"Merry Christmas," his father said. "Come get your presents

here."

She moved to the middle of the room and knelt on the rug. Her hair was brushed close to her head and tied back in a tight ponytail. Biddy wanted nothing more than to be out of the room.

"Two," she said, raising an eyebrow politely. "How'd I get two?" She was very quiet.

"Biddy bought you one all by himself," his mother said. "The small one."

She looked at him, and he had to look away. "Well, let's see what we have here," she said. She opened the large package first, a blouse, and lifted it gently from its wrapping. "It's beautiful. Isn't it?" Her parents agreed.

"Now open Biddy's," someone said.

She tore off the paper, the dark red box showing through. She gazed at it silently before opening it and pulling out the bottle. She screwed off the cap and sniffed.

"Mmm. Very nice. Smell." She dabbed her wrist and held it up to her mother, looking at Biddy intently. "Thank you," she said, leaning forward until their faces were almost touching, and, smiling hesitantly, she kissed him.

He started to cry.

"Now isn't that the goddamnedest thing you ever saw?" his father said. "What's wrong *now?"*

They waited, stunned, until he stopped sniffling. He said something about having to watch TV, and left the room.

His father followed, alone, and sat opposite him. "What was that all about?" he finally asked.

He didn't know. His father squinted at him. "Are you all right?" He nodded vigorously and his father stood up, half satisfied. "I don't know about you, guy," he said at the doorway. "Sometimes I'm not sure you have both oars in the water."

At eleven-thirty Christmas night his parents shut their bedroom door, telling him to get to bed soon, and at ten after, he went to the back porch and climbed into his boots, coat, scarf, and mittens. Stupid followed, and after a moment's indecision Biddy got his leash and took him along.

It was very cold outside, with no wind. Stupid led him down the driveway, weaving from snowbank to snowbank, his breath showing silver in the streetlight.

They walked toward the beach quietly, Biddy silent and the dog's sniffing muffled. The only sounds were the crunch of his boots on the snow and the jingling of the dog's license. He could smell the salt water, which surprised him. They passed Father Rubino's house on the

corner facing the bluffs and he noticed a light on in the living room. He crossed over to it through the yard, the dog loping along in chest-deep snow to keep up. He crept along the bushes and peered over the sill.

Father was alone, his back to the window, playing the piano. On a small table nearby was a glass of wine. There were a few sprigs of holly about, and a red candle over the fireplace. The rest of the house was dark and empty. The whole image seemed melancholy and sad, and Biddy pulled away from the window, turning his back to it.

At the edge of the bluffs the beach spread out below him, dark and noisy, the waves glistening in long lines. Stupid strained to go down, his breath hoarse and visible, and after Biddy tested the steps for slipperiness, they did, the sand poking through the snow in great coarse patches after they'd reached the bottom and walked up the rise to the water.

There was a suggestion of wind. At close range the waves made a sibilant sound slapping under the ice at the water's edge. It was salt-water ice, less smooth, greenish. It crumbled easily in his hand, as if made of countless tiny pellets, and lay tumbled about in slabs like translucent pavement that had been torn up. A piece of driftwood rose from it nearby and he maneuvered over it and sat down. The dog, after wandering the length of the leash, sat next to him. The horizon was invisible, the stars simply fading away at a certain point.

"I used to take Lady down here," he said, but Stupid gave no sign of understanding. A wave advanced a little farther than usual, collapsing some slabs in front of him.

"I could sing," he said. "Want me to sing?"

The dog sniffed the air, as if to guess his mood.

"I don't blame you," he said. He rubbed his thighs, bunched his mittens into fists. "It was a good Christmas. I was the one who had to make it a good Christmas, and it was a good Christmas. I'm the one who has to help me."

His rear felt wet, cold. There was ice on the log. "I wonder what Ronnie's doing," he said. He broke off a piece of ice and offered it to the dog, who sniffed it and turned away. He tossed it into the water. For a second it stayed opaque, bobbing, but then the dark sea color poured into it and it disappeared completely except for the faintest trace of an outline.

"I keep thinking I'm going to figure out something down here," he said. "What to do, how to make things better. What's wrong, even." He stood, wiping the seat of his pants. "And I never do."

You're a very fortunate boy, Sister had told him once. Jesus loves you, your parents love you, you're healthy and bright, you live in the best country in the world. Imagine if you lived in Pakistan or a place

like that. What do you have to be so unhappy about? He shook his head, starting for the bluffs with Stupid. There was a piece of salt ice on his mitten, and he touched it to his tongue, wincing at the familiar saline taste. He labored up the stairs behind the dog, surprised by his fatigue. The wind was picking up behind them. It had been a good Christmas and the beach at night was beautiful. Stupid was a good dog. He would get some sleep. Things would get better. At the top of the stairs, with the new wind across his face as he turned for one last glimpse of the beach in the moonlight, that was what he decided: things would get better.

IV. *Memorial Day*

BIDDY. *Completing the Checklist*

I saw things in my head. I knew they weren't real but that didn't make them any less important. I tried to talk to people about them and never got anywhere. It was like they were keeping something from me. If they're not, am I the only one like this?

They were dreams I could go to whenever I wanted: except I started them, I made them up. They were mine. But even there I couldn't always keep control.

Which could make it awful, like I was fighting myself, like what I thought was as hard to control as the way I threw a pass. When my punt was blocked or I threw the ball away on a double play, I got twice as frustrated: whose fault was that? It was like I knew myself and what I couldn't do so well that I couldn't even dream it right. I only wanted to do it right; to hold up my end, be part of a team, do a good job.

I didn't think I was crazy. But my father used to say if I wasn't, then I'd done a few things that needed explaining.

For a while I needed to see things in my head. But I learned that it didn't do any good unless I took them out of my head and made them real. And even that, like the BB gun on the roof, or the sailboat, might not be enough. Because I finally figured out that when you're through with all of that, you're still in the same place you always were.

A fish jumped nearby, a ripple breaking the water.

He slipped across the surface without hesitation, the cold swirling over him. With his mask a tight seal on his face he submerged, pulling away from the land. The water warmed as he grew used to it and cleared as he dived deeper. He pulled with wide, sweeping strokes and the bottom drifted closer, firm and inviting. It was rippled and sculpted by eddies and currents, and he flippered in close, his mouth holding air pressure steady in the flooded snorkel and his chin inches from the sand. Shells swept by, and hermit crabs, jerking sideways; the occasional gray ghost of a fish disappeared like a magician's illusion. He followed the slope easily, nosing swiftly along its contours with the confidence of an eel. At a horseshoe crab he stopped, kicking fluidly to stay down. He nudged it, hand on the smooth, hard carapace, and in its haste to escape it skimmed momentarily over the sand like a ray or a flatfish. The pressure in his lungs grew insistent and he looked to the surface, blue dazzling above him, and shot off the bottom, surging toward warmer and brighter levels, his momentum carrying him out of the water in the pleasing manner of a rocket.

"I wish you wouldn't stay down so long," his mother said from

the shore. “Every three minutes I think I have to go after you.”

He paddled easily for the beach, turning on his back and letting his fins do the work. He floated to the very edge of the shoreline, tiny wavelets breaking over his shoulders. His shoulders rubbed on the pebbly sand. When he stood, the water flowed off his body in a noisy rush, and he took off his fins and mask and crossed to his mother’s blanket, shaking off water like a spaniel before sitting down.

“Well, it’s not something I can do anything about,” Ginnie said, sighing. She was wearing sunglasses and had white cream on her nose, and her face resembled a mask. “What bothers me so much is they won’t say why.”

Biddy’s mother smoothed lotion onto her arms. “I guess it isn’t really anyone else’s business, they figure.”

Ginnie nodded, grimacing slightly.

“And we knew they were having problems.”

She nodded again and lay back, unhappy.

“Maybe it’s better this way. Maybe it’s better they find out now.”

“All the preparations, the invitations, the hall—”

“It’s terrible, I know. But what are you going to do? A divorce or annulment is better?”

“These kids, they don’t know what they want,” Ginnie said bitterly. “They get married, they don’t get married — to them it’s like crossing the street.”

His mother glanced out over the water. A red-and-white Sunfish was going by, a boy at the sail and a girl at the rudder, her foot trailing in the water. “I still can’t believe it,” she said.

“You can’t believe it? Check out *moi*. She comes to me — I’ll never forget it — and says, ‘Ma, I’m not getting married.’ Like that.” Ginnie’s face was to the sun, eyes closed. “Like she’s not having dinner that night.”

“Oh, she was upset.”

“Oh, yeah, she was upset. You should have seen her mother, with two hundred and fifty invitations out. She’s upset, but who ends up feeling like a jackass?”

Biddy settled back on his elbows, looking down the beach. The water still on his shoulders and chest was already warm from the sun. He eyed a puddle in his navel. Opposite him two girls lay on their bellies flanking a cassette player like marble lions on the steps of a museum.

“And how about your cousin’s daughter? From announcement to wedding it has to be six weeks. I tell you, these kids are crazy. She’s getting married next week the same day Cindy was going to. And she’s friends with Cindy, and the groom’s friends with Ronnie. They’ll both be there. Lovely, huh? I can’t wait to see the seating arrangements for

that one. I tell you, don't get married, Biddy. Save your mother some heartache." She rolled to her stomach, spreading her arms wide of the blanket to scoop sand as if she were swimming. "Or elope. Leave town and write us a note about it."

For Biddy, Doug DeCinces had always been unalterably a Baltimore Oriole, in his imagination as fixed and immutable at third base as his own identity as a Catholic. DeCinces was a Baltimore Oriole and could no more have gone to another team than Biddy could have joined another family. Journeymen came and went occasionally, utility infielders and relief pitchers, but the central Oriole core remained unchanging, unlike other teams such as California or New York, which seemed filled with malcontents and strangers. The Orioles were stability itself. They made do, won or lost — mostly won — with what they had. To Biddy it had been a great shock when the Orioles traded Doug DeCinces.

On a beautiful Saturday he lay in the backyard in the sun, the Bridgeport *Post* propped against the sleeping Stupid. The print rose and fell gently with the dog's breathing. The sports section was folded to isolate a piece analyzing the month-old trade of the Orioles' DeCinces for the Angels' Ford. The piece went into great detail: batting averages (.277 to.281), RBIs (11 to 10), home runs (6 to 1), and extra base hits (20 to 16), as well as intangibles. (DeCinces was a leader, Biddy read, willing to get his uniform dirty, gritty, a coach on the field, while Ford's attitude was a question mark.) Ford was quoted as saying all he wanted was a chance. The article concluded that while the Angels seemed to have had the better of the deal, it was still too early to tell.

He rolled over, head on his arm, and let the paper fall lightly across the dog. Inside the house his father was watching the NBC *Game of the Week*, California at Baltimore. Stupid lay inert under the newspaper, his rear end and legs sticking out.

Baseball seemed no more a part of his present than World Cup Soccer. He wasn't playing or following it. His father was worried and disappointed.

He had been a disappointment in many areas over the last few months, since Christmas. He hadn't done anything unusual or worrisome enough to galvanize his parents into making that series of appointments with Dr. Hanzlik, but he had been unhappy, listless, and his work at school had suffered. His third report card had been mediocre, as had his second, and to a lesser extent his first. There had been an ultimatum issued for the fourth, which was only weeks away: no improvement and he was going into a special motivational training program for three weeks. It was new, met in the mornings at a

smallish grade school nearby, and seemed less of a step than psychiatric help. If his grades plummeted still further, his ass, his father assured him, would be out of Our Lady of Peace so fast his head would swim. His parents were at a loss as to what else to do. He had quit the altar boys. Nothing seemed to be effective enough for him; nothing seemed to be creating any sort of change. As the weather improved, Mr. Carver's Cessna, wet and alone in its parking space, seemed to taunt him. He spent long hours rereading his notes and manuals, and his father wondered if he was getting enough iron.

It seemed to him, lying in the grass with the sun warming his arms, that he hadn't talked to anyone in a long time. Laura had a new friend and seemed distant. He hadn't seen Ronnie since Christmas. He rose without waking the dog, walked past the house to the street, and stood at the end of the driveway. Nothing was moving in either direction. Four houses down, Simon sat on the curb, hands on his shoes.

Biddy walked over and said hello. Simon didn't look up. "My mother went to the beach and I couldn't go," he said. There was not the slightest hint of sadness in his voice. His mother had a boyfriend, and they didn't always want him with them.

"Is she right down here?"

"In Milford."

"Well, you want to go down this beach?" Biddy said, pointing. "I'll take you."

"I don't want to go anywhere." He scuffed the pavement.

"Where's your baby-sitter?"

"Watching TV. I don't want to do anything. Leave me alone."

"Want me to—"

Simon got up, moved farther down the curb, and sat again. Biddy straightened up, angry, and turned away. Sit in the street, he thought. Get your feet run over. He returned to his yard and, before passing behind the house, glanced back and saw Simon still sitting where he'd left him, stubbornly determined, in all probability, to be in that same spot when his mother returned.

Biddy's math had been poor and was going downhill steadily. That was the gist of Sister Theresa's talk.

"And you know what it is, Biddy? You know what it is, don't you? It's carelessness. You can do the work. You do do the work. And then you make stupid mistakes, from carelessness." He nodded, let his eyes wander through the tangle of papers on her desk.

"It's a lack of respect, Biddy. For yourself, especially, but also for the work, and for me."

They were sitting in her office, off the main hallway. He was

forfeiting part of his lunchtime. He was thinking only of the Cessna. Outside the sun beat down and waves of heat rose from the playground.

She pointed to a number on a sheet. “See this? This is your average right now. That’s pretty shocking, young man. Are you shocked?”

“I’m surprised,” he said.

She looked at him grimly. “We’re trying everything we can with you, but our patience has a limit, let me tell you. You have to do something, too. If you earn this grade, I’m telling you right now I’m going to give you this grade. Is that understood?”

He nodded.

“Now go eat your lunch. And I want to see some improvement starting tomorrow, mister.”

He nodded again and shut the door behind him on the way out.

The hall was empty. Teddy appeared from the niche for the drinking fountain. “Let’s go up to the roof,” he whispered.

It was possible. The class was left on its honor, as Sister liked to say, for lunch, so they wouldn’t be missed unless someone checked. There was a shed adjoining the outside wall in the back. It had a low roof that allowed access to the higher roof. It was possible, for a few minutes. They slipped out the side doors and scrambled atop the shed, quickly pulling themselves up onto the main roof. Biddy stood up.

Sister Theresa stopped, halfway down the sidewalk, staring up at him.

“What are you, crazy?” Teddy whispered. “Get down.”

“Young man,” Sister called. “I’m not really seeing what I think I’m seeing, am I? Not two minutes after we talked?”

“Oh, God,” Teddy said. He lowered his face to the roof, thumping his forehead on a shingle.

“Come on down,” Sister said. “And as soon as your feet touch ground you’re in serious trouble.”

Sister didn’t believe in suspensions. Missing school never helped anyone, and she wasn’t handing out vacations but punishments, she used to say. Sister believed in detentions, long strings of them; the longer ones students would sometimes imagine to be the worldly equivalents of Purgatory. His was for two weeks, which was, not coincidentally, all that was left of the school year. Teddy’s was for a week. Biddy’s parents did not take the news well.

“The roof,” his father said. “Can you imagine this? She calls him in to try and straighten him out and he ends up climbing around the roof. Biddy, just what is wrong with you?”

Biddy sat in the kitchen feeding the dog his supper bit by bit under the table. Sister had called home with all the details.

"I don't know who's more aggravating, you or your sister."

His sister had recently thrown chalk at one of the lay teachers.

"I really don't know what to do with you," his father said. "I really don't. What am I going to do? Ground you? You never go anywhere anyway. Tell you you can't stare out windows?"

"He needs to see someone," his mother said. "We don't know what we're doing. A professional."

"I'll tell you what I will do," his father said. "If your grades haven't improved on this last report card, you can kiss Our Lady of Peace goodbye. If you're not going to learn, you might as well do it for free."

"Don't be an idiot," his mother said.

"I'm not being an idiot. And I'm not pissing money away if he's not interested, either. I can tell you that right now. Maybe the school has something to do with it, anyway. If they stopped working on his soul and tried working on his head we'd all be a little better off."

His father went into the den and his mother tossed salad in a beige ceramic bowl in front of her. "Finish your supper," she said. "Your father's upset right now, that's all."

"I don't need to see a doctor, Mom," he said quietly.

"Well, what do you need?" she said, pausing over the salad. "We'd all like to know. Have any idea? What do you need?"

His parents, unfortunately, did not enjoy the luxury of being able to worry about him alone. His sister over the last four months had thrown chalk at a teacher, attempted to feed the dog tacks, shoved Sister Theresa on the stairs, started a fight at the water fountain, and tried to bury all of her school-books in the garden. She had racked up more detention time and earned worse grades at school than Biddy. And there was the matter of her temper. "Don't ask me where she gets it," her mother would say. "When she gets upset, it's like *Raging Bull*." Recently she'd had a fight with her friend Lisa, whose mother had called to complain that her daughter was "still bleeding" as of the time of the phone call. Kristi had remained unrepentant.

She sat in the backyard next to him, on a lounge chair she had pulled alongside his. Both of them were eyeing the dog, waiting idly for it to do something amusing or interesting. It stretched and rubbed the side of its head in the grass. "You stay around," their father said, and the dog looked up apprehensively. "You stay around or you'll really be on my shit list."

The three of them had been in the sun too long and Kristi was growing dangerously bored. They had been spending a lot of time in the yard recently, owing in part to their various punishments but also of their own accord, to get on their parents' nerves. Their father was

setting the ladder up against the garage wall nearest them. They were getting rain in the garage, and he wanted to check the shingles. The ladder had a sliding arrangement that allowed it to extend to twice its storage height and two hook clamps that kept it in whatever extended position was required. He set it up carefully, working unhurriedly in the bright sun, and returned to the house.

Kristi had been watching all of this with a close interest. When the back door closed, she got up and crossed to the ladder and, reaching high on her tiptoes, one hand spread delicately against the garage for support, she flipped one of the locking clamps away from the rung it was to support. That accomplished, she returned to her chair.

"What are you doing?" he said.

She didn't move, her eyes remaining on the ladder. He glanced toward the house. The dog's tail wagged, stirring mosquitoes. His father banged out of the back door and walked over, dropping tools on the pavement near the ladder with a musical noise. He sorted through them, choosing two.

Biddy was as bored as Kristi was, and feeling resentful besides. How far would he fall? Ten feet? Twelve feet? He watched his father mount the ladder and begin to climb. Halfway up he reached the point where the two halves were joined by the clamps and Biddy saw clearly the strain suddenly exerted on the lone remaining one.

"Dad," he called sharply. His father stopped, surprised by the tone. His sister looked at him.

"One of the things is undone." He pointed. His father looked, and hastened down the ladder.

"Thanks," he said, peering at the clamp. "I set both of them. How the hell'd that happen?"

Kristi looked away. "It popped off while you were climbing," Biddy said.

His father looked unconvinced. "I never heard of that before." Biddy shrugged. He reset the clamp and climbed carefully up to the roof.

"Jerk," Kristi whispered. "Fool."

He went over to the dog, who curled onto his back with his paws in the air at his approach. "We don't care, do we, Stupid," he said, scratching its belly just under the rib cage. Its rear paw began to thump against the ground. Abruptly it twisted to its feet and trotted to the garden, sniffing with concentration along the fence, having seen or imagined something. Biddy followed. He collapsed into his chair in boredom and it folded up jerkily around him, banging the back of his head and tipping him backward over the fence into the garden. His head lay in the soft turned earth near a tomato plant. Stupid barked

and leaped about the wreckage, startled. His sister had half folded his chair while he was scratching the dog. He started to disentangle himself, one thigh scratched and his hair full of dirt. His sister was still laughing and his father was standing on the roof, peering over at him. “Are you all right?” he called.

He nodded, still trying to climb out. The chair seemed to be holding him down, trapping him in its folding mechanism like a mousetrap or a crab’s claw.

“Now we need lessons on how to sit in a chair,” his father said. “Mr. Abbott, meet Mr. Costello.”

His father held the phone in his direction as though it were for him. “Mr. Rotondo wants to know why you’re not going out for Little League this year,” he said.

“Tell him because I don’t want to,” Biddy said.

His father returned the phone to his ear. “Paulie?” he said. “He’s not showing much interest this year.” He listened for a moment. “I’ll tell him.” He cupped his hand over the mouthpiece. “He says they really need good people this year and all the positions are wide open.”

Biddy shook his head.

“Still can’t sell him on it, Paulie. I know, I know. He was getting better and better.” He covered the phone again. “He says you’re a little Doug DeCinces at third.”

Biddy left the room.

“He may come around later,” he heard his father say. “Thanks for calling.”

They sat in the den watching *Jason and the Argonauts*. He had seen it before and liked the harpies.

“If that isn’t a bite in the ass,” his father said. “All last summer you wanted to be on the team, wanted me to work with you. All those hours Dom and I took you guys over to the dump and worked out. And here I am telling Paulie Rotondo all year you can’t wait.”

He refused to feel guilty.

“You’re losing interest in everything. What’re you going to do, hang around the house the rest of your life? Maybe your mother’s been right all along. Maybe we should be worried.”

“Maybe I’m depressed,” Biddy said.

“Yeah, you’re depressed. Twelve years old. You’re depressed.”

“Thirteen.”

His father didn’t respond. He answered a knock at the back door and returned to the den and stood by the television, ready to turn it off. “Your friend’s here,” he said. “Go out and do something.”

“Where we goin’?” Teddy asked.

“The airport,” Biddy said.

“The airport? Why the airport? You want to build a fort?”

Biddy said no, and denied he was intending to play guns or look for rats, either. They reached the hurricane fence at the end of Birch Street and knelt at the hole underneath it. Weeds surged up through the metal links. He held the fence up but Teddy refused to budge until he knew why they were going.

“I want to look at some stuff,” Biddy said, still holding the fence, considerable tension on his arm. “We can look at airplanes.”

“Look at airplanes?”

“Are you coming or not?” His tone surprised him.

“No, I’m not coming,” Teddy said. “Why do we always gotta do what you want to do?”

Biddy crouched low and slipped under the fence. Teddy followed.

They cantered down the slope to the basin of the airport, moving quickly and efficiently along paths they knew well. At the base they followed the perimeter west, skirting hillocks and standing marsh water. They worked their way through a thin path in the cattails, the reeds underfoot cracking crisply with each step. At points brown water oozed over the reed mat of the path, touching their sneakers. It filled the air with a musty smell.

“Where we goin’?” Teddy said. “There’s nothing over here but the runway.”

“I told you. The airport,” Biddy said.

“The real airport?” Usually when they spoke of “the airport” they meant the marshes and flatlands surrounding it, not the actual installation. “We’ll get in trouble.”

“No, we won’t.” The last thing he wanted was trouble. The reeds parted and the runway lay before him, the tarmac gray, smooth, and wide.

“We have to cross it,” he said.

“Cross it?”

He was already away from the cattails, checking the sky for incoming planes. Satisfied, he started to run, low to the ground, the heat off the paved surface dry and intense. On the other side he ducked into the weeds, crashing through the fragile yellow stalks. Teddy was right behind him.

“If you wanted to come over here, why didn’t you have your father drive you around?” he said, panting. Biddy ignored the question and struck out for the access road to the terminal.

The Bridgeport terminal was small and resembled a longish restaurant with a two-story tower. It was not very impressive on the best of days, and was even less so from their angle, surrounded by dark pavement and swimming in the heat waves of the afternoon.

With the tower in sight Teddy grew appreciably more restive and lagged behind. By the time Biddy had reached the tower, Teddy had been lured off by a side attraction and was no longer visible. Biddy tested the door leading to the tower, but it was locked. A moment later, a man in white shirtsleeves opened it from the inside and asked what he could do for him.

"Could I go up in the tower for just a second?" Biddy said.

The man said no, and then changed his mind and said yes, what the heck, and led him up the stairs. At the top a man at a console, also in shirtsleeves, smiled at him. A fan whirred behind them. The man indicated to his friend that they'd better get him out. Biddy looked north to the hangars where he'd been with his mother and confirmed the blind spot. He pointed. "What's over there?" he said. Just beyond the hangar he could make out the very tip of Mr. Carver's Cessna, a sliver of white and blue.

"What, the hangars?" the man asked.

Biddy shook his head. "Behind them."

"I don't know," the man said. "Can't see behind them. A parking area." He put his hand on Biddy's back and led him down the stairs.

Teddy was waiting for him when he emerged into the glare. "God, why didn't you wait for me?" he said. "You got to go up there! You knew I was out here!"

It wasn't so great, Biddy assured him, the Cessna tail still vivid and hidden.

He gazed at Biddy in helpless amazement. "Why didn't you wait?"

"I had something to do up there," Biddy said. "You didn't."

Teddy swung and Biddy avoided the blow and held his ground. They stood facing each other before Teddy relaxed, too disgusted to fight. "I came all this way," he said, and turned his back on Biddy and left the way they had come. Biddy didn't follow. Halfway across the runway the yellow security jeep, on the alert because of their earlier crossing, emerged from hiding like a lazy four-wheeled spider. Teddy was piled into it and it circled back toward the terminal. Biddy watched it grow as it drew nearer before he trotted across the parking lot to the southern exit of the Burma Road and turned toward home.

Teddy wasn't speaking to him any longer. Laura told him in class, two days later.

"Can you come out today?" he whispered. They were communicating in short bursts while Sister wrote on the board.

"I have to go somewhere," she said. "But tonight I'm sleeping out with Sarah Alice."

That night he crept from the house at five after one. His father hadn't gone to sleep until late. He trailed down the empty streets

barefoot, in shorts and a T-shirt. The Ranseys had a screened-in patio set away from the house near the edge of their property. The property adjoined a vacant lot that was overgrown and unlighted, visually impenetrable at night. He felt his way through, remembering paths, and climbed the low wooden fence bordering their yard. He paused at the screened wall of the porch.

They were both asleep, twisted in light sleeping bags. He scratched the metal surface with his nail, the screen sounding like an emery board. “Laura,” he whispered. “Laura.”

She lifted her head abruptly and looked at him. Then she looked at Sarah Alice, still asleep. She got up, groggy, her covers falling away in a whisper, and came outside. She was wearing a white nightshirt with tiny green figures on it.

“What are you doing?” she said. “What time is it?”

“It’s not too late. Let’s go to the beach.”

“No.” She rubbed her eyes. “It’s late.”

“C’mon.” He took her wrist. “You wanted me to come over.”

She pulled toward the screen. “I should tell Sarah Alice.”

“Let her sleep.”

“She’ll wake up and find me gone.”

“No, she won’t.”

She hesitated. “Let me get my flip-flops.” When she returned, she sat in the grass to put them on. Then she stood, clearing the hair from her face, and took his hand and they ran to the fence and climbed over.

She was frightened in the vacant lot, the darkness alive with rustlings and insect noises, but he moved them swiftly through and they came out on the far side under a streetlight. He waited while she scratched the side of her calf thoroughly, and then they headed down the street, her flip-flops making rubbery, popping sounds.

He heard a car and saw a flash of headlights and pulled her quickly behind a hedge, crouching low. It edged closer.

“What are we hiding for?” she whispered but half understood, appreciating the heightened sense of imagined danger and suspense. Her palm was moist and warm in his hand. His shoulder brushed the hedge, picking up cool dew. The car’s engine idled past on the other side.

“He’s going so slow,” he whispered.

Her eyes widened. “What do you think he’s doing?”

He shook his head. In her crouch her chin was nearly between her knees. The car crept away.

After a short wait he raised his eyes above the hedge. The car was at a stop sign at the end of the street. It was a station wagon, with an odd license plate: LEMM. It turned left down the beach road.

"It's gone," he said. "Let's go."

"I want to go back," Laura said. "I'm scared."

"Come on." He held his hand out. "He's gone."

They walked a bit faster, the beach dark ahead of them. Laura looked fearfully behind them every so often. He was happy to be with her and swung her arm as they reached the stop sign, the breeze cool off the sea. He had all sorts of things he wanted to talk to her about.

She said, "What's that?" Her tone stopped him as though he were on the edge of a cliff. The station wagon was parked along the beach road to their left. The LEMM shone in the plate lights. He stood still for the briefest moment, stunned, before pulling her under a rhododendron in the nearest yard. They peered out at the car.

"What's he doing?" she whispered. She was terrified.

"I don't see anyone," he said. His eyes covered every inch of the car. The interior was dark and he couldn't discern any movement.

"Look," Laura said. It was a choked whisper, a horrible sound. She was pointing to the right, at some bushes across the street black with their own shadows even under the streetlight. He couldn't see anything.

He was going to speak but she continued to point. He looked again, and there was a man's face in the bush, white, disembodied in the shadow, the eyes black dots. His forehead went instantly cool and he felt as though he'd lost his wind.

"What's he doing, what's he doing, what's he doing?" Laura whispered. He took her arm, afraid she would bolt.

"We got to get out of here." God, he realized, he's looking at us.

He glanced behind them. There was nothing but fifty feet of lawn, with a white house to silhouette them. He looked around desperately.

"He's moving," Laura whispered, her voice rising.

There was nothing to do but run. "Laura," he whispered, imagining he sounded calm. "Laura, listen. We've got to run. Take your flip-flops off." He waited while she slipped her feet out of them. "Turn around and when I say run, run and don't stop until you're home. We're going to run together, but if he catches us I'm going to let you go and you're going to *keep running*, okay?"

She nodded, biting her lip.

"Ready?"

She edged around. He took a last look back. The face was gone.

"Go!" he said, and burst from under the bush with her hand in his, pulling it as hard as he dared, both of them flying down the pavement, Laura grabbing at her nightshirt in a frantic attempt to hitch it up. They heard the car start behind them with a roar and Laura shrieked and he immediately pulled her between two houses, cutting through yards, leaping a sandbox and a garden. They flattened

along the wall of another house, panting. She sobbed quietly and he poked his head around the corner a few inches. The station wagon cruised past in the distance, still moving very slowly.

He put his head back against the wall. “We’re okay,” he said. “He won’t find us.”

“I want to go back,” Laura wailed quietly. “I told you I didn’t want to come.”

He took her hand and led her down the driveway to the next street, easing a tricycle away with a gentle push. A dog barked nearby and the wind made a soft, sweeping sound through the leaves of the trees. He heard the engine just in time and clapped a hand to her mouth, pulling her back; it was the station wagon, driving without headlights. They sprinted back the way they’d come, not speaking, not slowing down, staying in backyards, clawing their way over dividing fences and hedges, cutting their feet, scraping their knees, their running as headlong as it could be without total loss of control. Laura raced ahead of him, her hair alive in the wind. They swept through the vacant lot, crashing through vines and creepers, and near her yard Laura missed a turn and sprawled headlong over a bush with a great crash of wood and vegetation, her heel lashing the air in front of him.

He rushed to her, asking if she was all right, and she was crying harder, more from the shock than anything else, and she stood and knocked his hand away and continued down the path. As they approached the fence, she pushed him away again and he ducked back, sure she’d be safe at that point, with lights and anxious voices of people filling her yard, for Sarah Alice, tangled in her nightshirt and buried under the sleeping bag, had woken up to find her missing.

The Sieberts were in the Lirianos’ living room, pants pressed, hair washed, dresses ironed, and bearing presents, when Louis came downstairs and announced he wasn’t going to the wedding.

“You’re not going to the what?” Dom said, and Louis went back upstairs.

“He’s not going to the what?” he repeated to Ginnie, his tie half tied.

Ginnie shrugged. It was news to her.

They sat around the coffee table in a semicircle, slightly embarrassed, while Dom went up to talk with him. They heard Dom’s voice rise and fall. He came downstairs.

“He says he’s not going. He won’t tell me why.” He went into the bathroom and resumed tying his tie. “Christ,” he said finally. “Is the whole world going nuts? Is that it?”

Ginnie went up to talk with Louis.

“If he’s not going, then I’m not either,” Mickey said.

“Don’t start,” Dom said from the bathroom. “Just don’t start. Because if you’re staying home you’re staying home in traction.”

Ginnie came downstairs grim. “We’ll talk about it later,” she said. “He just says he’s not going.”

“Doesn’t that frost your ass?” Dom said. He was having trouble with his jacket sleeve. “These kids’re gonna drive us all off cliffs. If they haven’t already.”

Louis appeared at the top of the stairs. “Sorry I can’t go, Mr. and Mrs. Siebert,” he said. “I can’t, though.”

“Louis, what in the Christ is the matter?” Dom said.

“I can’t, Dad. Sorry.” He went back upstairs.

Dom remained where he was, staring after him. “Aw, let’s get out of here,” he said, shaking his head, “before I lose any more of them.”

The wedding itself was at Our Lady of Peace and the reception at the Red Coach Inn. It was Biddy’s third wedding and the ceremony was becoming familiar. Sheona, the bride, glanced around as if wondering if all of this were not some sort of elaborate hoax.

Father Rubino handled the Mass with dispatch, labeling the occasion joyous and celebratory as though he were narrating a travelogue. Biddy stood next to his mother, with Cindy and Mickey in the pew ahead of them. Cindy was wearing dark blue, like her father, with a deep red sash. Her hair was up and the thin gold chains were missing from her neck. They had been gifts from Ronnie, he remembered.

The sun came through the windows. Irises on the altar moved slightly in the breeze from the open doors, heavy on their stems. “If he gets any skinnier, they might as well leave the hangers in the shirts,” he heard Dom say about the groom.

Biddy rode to the reception in the same car as Cindy. She hadn’t said a word the entire day that he had been aware of. His father drove in silence, respecting her feelings, awkward.

At the Red Coach Inn they signed the guest register, his name following Cindy’s and hers reading Cynthia Amanda Liriano — for her, oddly formal. They piled silver-and-white presents on one table and searched for name cards with table assignments on the other. Biddy and Cindy would be at table 8, his father at table 9. They threaded their way past circular tables arranged with place settings and fruit cups waiting. Kristi and Mickey were already at table 8, with two teenaged cousins; Dom, Ginnie, and his mother were already at 9. They were early. Uncomfortable where he was and spotting empty chairs at 9, Biddy moved and sat next to Dom.

“This guy’s given up on Little League,” his father said.

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

"Don't ask me. Paulie Rotondo would love to have him."

"He's a great guy, Paulie. Knows his baseball, Biddy," Dom said. "Don't kid yourself. Good man to play for."

"I've heard he's a little wild," Biddy's mother said.

"Wild? He's berserk," Dom said. "Listen: here's a good Paulie Rotondo story. Me and Paulie, we go out a few years ago, we're going somewhere, I don't remember where. We're driving down the road, we go past a bar, Paulie slams on the brakes. 'Aw, look who's here,' he goes. I don't see anybody. We pull over and go inside. There're two Puerto Ricans playing shuffleboard — you know, that bar game, like bowling. Paulie says, 'Beer and an orange juice,' and then goes to the Puerto Ricans, 'How you doing?' They're nodding and smiling, you know. Paulie picks up one of those shuffleboard discs and says, 'Dom, don't get excited. I'm gonna kill this guy.' Then he goes to one of the Puerto Ricans, 'Remember me? Sure.' Paulie's got this big grin, right? 'Remember? You don't remember? You took the wallet right out of my pocket. Remember? Right after you kicked me right here?' And he points to his face. These guys had mugged him the week before. 'Dom, watch the other one,' he says to me." Dom pantomimed himself at the time, stunned. Biddy's father, already laughing, closed his eyes and shook his head. "And he goes, 'Don't you remember?' and this guy starts backing away and reaches for the beer bottle and Paulie takes that metal shuffleboard disc and hits him like Warren Spahn right here"—he spread his forefinger and thumb across his sternum—"and the sound is like somebody just stepped on a rotten board. This guy goes down like he's shot."

"That's horrible," Biddy's mother said. His father was laughing so hard he had to wipe tears from his eyes. "And that's someone you think Biddy should be playing for?"

"Well, shit," Dom said, his smile fading. "He's not Juan Corona. He's just a crazy guy."

Ronnie Pierce found his seat at table 20, the table adjoining number 8. He could not have been closer to Cindy had he sat at her table. They were back to back with their left shoulders nearly touching. Dom put his hand over his eyes. Biddy's mother wondered in a fierce whisper how they could have put them together like that.

"They probably assigned them by number," Ginnie said. "They probably figured eight and twenty were far enough apart."

"Somebody forgot to look at a floor plan," his father said.

When Sandy and Michael arrived, Biddy returned to his table and took his place beside Cindy. He would have liked to have said hello to Ronnie but wasn't sure whether or not he should. As far as he knew, Cindy and Ronnie hadn't acknowledged each other.

Everyone rose to applaud the parents of the groom, who were

making their way to their table with a cautious, gracious clumsiness, and then the parents of the bride, and finally the bride and groom themselves, introduced after a dramatic pause as one couple, using the bride's new name.

They remained standing for the toast, all eyes turned to the head table. Cindy and Ronnie stood shoulder to shoulder beside their seats. Neither moved or flinched. The best man, thin and awkward, adjusted his glasses and began by mentioning that he'd culled some quotes from Homer but now thought them inappropriate. Biddy's gaze wandered to his parents' table, where Dom was looking back in his direction, keeping an eye on Cindy and Ronnie. He had said after the breakup that if he saw Ronnie anywhere near his daughter he'd have both their asses on a stick. But he couldn't blame them for this, Biddy reflected.

They settled down to fruit cups and then smallish gray-and-white plates arranged with a slice of roast beef, a pile of green peas, and some sort of mushroom-and-onion mix. He ate quickly, the food unremarkable. Cindy ate as though she were very tired. Kristi ate the meat and spooned the rest into the sugar holder. Beneath the crystal, ribbons of onions and slippery sliced mushrooms began to fill the cracks between the sugar packets.

"Kristi, you're so gross," Mickey said. She smoothed a leftover brown bit onto her finger and flicked it at him but hit Biddy instead.

"You better put some cold water on that," Cindy said, and he decided against retaliation and left the table for the men's room.

He stopped at the door to let a busboy with a tray get by. The band was playing "Sunrise, Sunset," and the bride was dancing with her father. The air smelled vaguely of melon and urine.

In the men's room he stood at the sink washing his hands, gazing at the spot on his shirt in the mirror. Two busboys stood at the urinals, heads turned toward each other. Their white coats were dirty. Their voices filled the bathroom. "It don't matter," one said. "God's God. He can do whatever he wants to."

"Yeah, well, I think like he hasn't got complete control yet," the other said, shaking his hips, finishing up. "There's too much bad in the world." He crossed to the sink next to Biddy and gave his hands a perfunctory splash.

"Well, my brother's studying to be a priest and he don't think so," said the one at the urinal.

The one at the sink wondered what that had to do with anything.

It was fascinating and incongruous to Biddy, God at the urinals, God while checking the part in their hair. He was encouraged and discouraged at the same time.

"Something wrong, kid?" one of them said, and he realized he'd

been staring, and shook his head.

When he returned, most of the tables were empty. The dance floor was crowded with couples shifting back and forth, moving in different directions.

Ronnie leaned back in his seat, turning his head, and tapped Cindy on the shoulder. She jumped.

"How you doin'?" he said.

She said she was fine. After a moment he turned away.

"'For us there can never be happiness,'" she said.

Ronnie's head turned. "What?"

"'For us there can never be happiness.'"

"Oh," he said. "Oh. 'We must learn to be happy without it.' What's-her-name, from *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*."

"What's her name?" Cindy twiddled a knife, still with her back to him.

"Annette Andre."

She smiled.

The bride and groom swept by, doing some sort of waltz. "'Some things are not forgivable,'" Ronnie said, clearly and distinctly. "'Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable.'"

Cindy paled, lowering her eyes to the tablecloth. "Vivien Leigh," she said. "Vivien Leigh in *A Streetcar Named Desire*." There was a long silence, the two of them sitting as if they'd never spoken.

His mother leaned over him, her perfume cool and not unpleasant. "Dance with me," she said. "Your father won't."

His alternative was staying at the table. They walked to the dance floor and eased into an open space. She showed him where to put his hands and they shuffled back and forth. The floor was the same deep maroon as the floor of the piano room at school. Relatives occasionally drifted into view, smiling with approval. His mother asked him if Ronnie and Cindy had been fighting and he said no.

The reception was well past the point at which table distinctions and seating arrangements broke down, and those he had been sitting with or near were scattered in every direction, Dom by the head table, his father at the bar, his sister outside. (He'd seen her flash by the dark window, a ghost in her white dress, while he was dancing.) At tables 8 and 20 only Cindy and Ronnie were left, still in their original seats. When the dance with his mother had ended, he joined them. The tables were emptying around them, some people leaving, others dancing. The three of them remained, listening to "Color My World." The band segued into "Heat Wave." Ronnie got up and crossed to the head table, congratulating everyone and saying goodbye before leaving by the far door. Biddy wasn't sure Cindy knew he was gone.

They left before the Lirianos, agreeing to meet at the party that his aunt, the mother of the bride, was having after the reception. From the door he could see Cindy where he'd left her, alone in a sea of tables, her dark blue dress solid and unmoving against the clutter and scattered chairs.

"Drinks," the mother of the bride said. "Who couldn't use a drink?" They were sitting around the living room, adults tired and drunk, children tired and bored. The bride's father was spread over a chair and two hassocks. He looked boneless.

Disappointingly few had been able to come, a ragged few besides the Sieberts and Lirianos. Louis had refused even this second chance. Cindy was in the den. Biddy's sister and Mickey sat on the sofa nursing sodas, having long since given the day up for lost.

"Well, Sheona should be halfway to the airport by now," the hostess said. Some of the guests nodded vaguely.

"It was a beautiful wedding," his mother said.

"Beautiful," Ginnie agreed.

Someone said that Sheona had looked marvelous.

"Well, we weren't sure about the gown at first," her mother said from the kitchen.

"Oh, Christ, were we not sure," said the father of the bride. Biddy had assumed he was asleep. The guests laughed, and then the room was as uncomfortable as before. There was some desultory talk about the choice of honeymoon spots. Biddy got up, hearing the piano, and went into the den.

Cindy was sitting straight-backed on the piano stool, her hands hesitating over the white and black keys. She flipped a page or two of the worn music book, intent on the notes. As far as he knew, she couldn't read music. She tested a few notes, singing softly, and ran through it again. She was awful.

He moved closer and stood by the piano, the open interior and lid like black-and-tan jaws. She did not acknowledge his presence and he stood quietly content with that decision.

The music book was swinging shut as she tried to play, and he reached out and held it, belly across the corner of the cabinet. Her eyes never left it. She played a bit more and then cried, her sobs full and low as she fought to control them. "Goddamnit," she said. "Oh, goddamnit." She closed the key cover sharply and the keys made a startled dissonant sound.

"You all right in there?" Dom called from the living room.

They hadn't heard her crying, he thought, they couldn't have, or they wouldn't have stayed where they were, calling in a question. They couldn't have left her to cry alone. He wanted to help, and was

absolutely helpless: someone without pump or patch watching the boat go down. She straightened up, blinking and miserable, and shook off his attempt to lay his hand between her shoulder blades. Then she opened the key cover and shut it again, uncertain what to do with herself. He watched her for a short time before easing into a nearby chair in a kind of vigil, heartbroken.

Afterward the Lirianos' car refused to start. On the way home, with everyone in their car, his father mentioned that it was a shame Louis hadn't come.

Dom shifted in back, his blue suit rumpled, collar open. They were packed in tightly. "Yeah, it's too bad," he said. There was an edge to his voice. Biddy detected it immediately and his father seemed to miss it altogether.

"Well, Louis is a good kid," his father continued. "I'm sure things'll work out. If there's any real problem, I'm sure it'll come out."

"Walt," his mother warned. Even she sensed some sort of thin ice.

"Yeah, there's a problem," Dom said. He was drunk, and angry. Biddy was gradually beginning to perceive that the car was a hideous trap of a sort, eight people in a locked closet with an explosive. "There's a problem all right. The problem is he still doesn't have a job." There was a silence, Biddy holding Kristi more tightly on his lap as if to protect her physically from the awfulness of the situation. They had passed the airport minutes ago, and the blue-and-white Cessna had stood out, tail erect and wings catching light. Biddy's father had been promising to find Louis a part-time job for thirteen months. He had not succeeded.

"Look. I've told you I've been working on it."

"Yeah, you're working on it. Meanwhile the kid stays home and begins to wonder if retards ever get jobs in this world."

"Dom," Ginnie said.

"He's working on it. The kid tells her he can't go to the wedding, he feels like a bum, he's not working. We tell him he's still a student, he don't want to hear it. All he knows is that he's been trying to get a job for over a year. And he wants to work at Sikorsky. Anywhere. Don't ask me why. He likes Walter here."

"I told you these things don't happen overnight," his father said, also angry. "They're not hiring. We're all in the same boat."

"No. You're in the boat. He's in the water," Dom said. Biddy wanted to jump out of the car. "Yeah, times're tough. You're working your fingers to the bone for him."

They drove the rest of the way in silence and let the Lirianos out at Ryegate Terrace. As they drove away, Biddy closed his eyes and tried prematurely to begin the process of ending, once and for all, a

day that had already dragged on for far too long.

With the sunlight mirrored in undulating patterns on the water ahead of him, he cruised just on the surface, the lower half of his mask below the water and the upper half above, the waterline wavering across the glass in front of his eyes like the bubble in a level. He struck out straight from shore and dipped down with the control of a sand shark, slipping through the colder water near the bottom and leveling out just above the sand, kicking hard and gazing at the various tiny landmarks of the sea floor as they reeled by.

He was in a thermocline, and the effect was striking: six inches above his head, the water, markedly warmer, held so many particles in suspension it seemed opaque, and the separation was so distinct the effect was that of a brown ceiling, a long, low tunnel, brown sand inches below him, brown water no less penetrable to the eye above him. Through it he soared, kicking away from the land with still plenty of air in his lungs, the water itself a corridor for him, showing him a way, setting him on a specific track.

Taking Off

Things are not the way they should be. I keep complaining, and Kristi's right: I'm too scared to do anything about it. We have to be better to each other, and we're not. We have to think about each other, and we don't. I don't do enough and what I do doesn't work. If I'm not such a fool, I should prove it. Things get worse and worse, and doing something isn't so scary anymore. I've been playing kids' games all this time like it would help and it won't. All that planning and work I was doing and I just had to ask myself: Who are you kidding? Really, who are you kidding? Because I knew I was just playing games. I knew then that I had to make it real and not chicken out, to stop being such a baby about everything. Who was going to help me if I didn't? Who was going to change me if I couldn't? I think if you don't do something about things you don't like, you get what you deserve. I've been stupid all along. When my father told me either to shit or get off the pot, I should have listened. He was right.

A cardinal lighted nearby, a marvelous red against the backdrop of green, and was gone, the branch swaying in its absence. Biddy sat on the corner of the cellar door in the backyard, the dog's leash in his hand. The dog was in the house. He thought about nothing. Flies crisscrossed over the tomato plants in the garden. There was no reason for him to be holding the leash.

His father was cutting the grass. The engine housing on the lawn mower was loose and it added immeasurably to the racket. The mower crossed back and forth before him, edging nearer each time, his father trudging along behind, arms sweaty and flecked with grass.

A newspaper lay near his foot, luminous in the sun. In it Biddy had read how to come up with cool alternatives to summer suppers and had seen a UPI photo of a German shepherd curled on the shoulder of a highway near its mate. Its mate, one leg sprawled at an odd angle, was dead. The caption, entitled "Lonely Vigil," related that the dog had refused food for three days. The lawn mower rolled to the side of his foot and stopped.

"Lift your feet," his father said. He lifted his feet.

His father bent over the engine housing, and the mower idled down and went off, the blades spinning with an empty, stuttering sound. He pushed it a few feet away and sat down.

"Little distracted today?" he asked, looking at the mower as though it bothered him.

"Mmm."

His father shook his head, sweeping grass from his pants. "Biddy and his magic violin." He sighed.

Biddy looked at him. “Where’d you get that?” he asked. “What’s that mean?” His father had used it for years and it had always seemed a kind of nonsense or catchphrase, interesting or funny, if at all, only in its meaninglessness.

“Get what?”

“That—‘magic violin.’”

He seemed startled by the question. “Oh, I don’t know. It’s years and years old.” A distant lawn mower started, a ghostly echo of the one silent before them. “Maybe it was a lead-in to a radio show.”

“You don’t remember?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what the big interest here is, either,” he said. He squinted as if the outlines of the memory were taking shape in the hazy sky to the north. “I have an impression of an all-girl orchestra, for some reason, but I’m not sure. They’d introduce them in those days like they did more than just play or perform, like they did magic things with their instruments.” He rubbed his nose. “What was funny was that they were usually terrible. You know, Joe Blow and his magic xylo-phone. I guess I just remembered somebody with their magic violin.”

Biddy spread his toes in the grass, tearing up strands.

His father stood, flapping the back of his shirt to cool himself. “That’s the best I can do, guy. Try and make sense out of everything that comes out of your old man’s mouth and you’ll really be in trouble.”

He bent over the mower to restart it while Biddy wrapped the dog’s leash around his arm, rolling it tightly in an idle attempt to create the effect of chain mail. His arm from wrist to elbow wrapped in metal, he got up and returned to the house, testing his new armor by banging it against the drainpipe on the way in.

That Wednesday the report card came: they sat in their chairs, twenty-eight shining examples of self-control, while Sister called their names, one by one, alphabetically. And one by one, alphabetically, they went up to receive their card, thanked Sister, returned to their seats, took a breath, girded themselves, and opened it. Biddy, an “S,” was near the end. Every student, having watched others before him, tried to keep a poker face; every student failed. Teddy Bell had been one of the first, and after sitting down he’d given a stifled cry as if he’d been bitten.

Biddy had taken Sister Theresa’s remarks to heart, studying diligently for the final math test, and had suffered through it nonetheless, having fallen too far behind. It was possible he got a good grade, he reminded himself, watching her. Nothing, in fact, would have surprised him more.

“Eustace Siebert,” Sister said. He went up and took the card from her hand, murmuring his thanks. She looked directly at him and he was unable to read her face. He sat back down and unfolded the white card deliberately, his eyes slipping down the column of letter grades to Pre-Algebra at the bottom, across from which was printed, in blue pen, an F. It was gracefully done, the spine reinforced with a double line and the upper arm disappearing in a smooth wisp of a curve. His eyes roamed back up the column: B and B and B and B. For the first time, no A’s. For the first time, an F. He closed the card.

Laura had received her grades. She was an exception to the class rule: he couldn’t tell with any assurance how good or bad they were, although he guessed good. He wouldn’t find out, because she wasn’t talking to him anymore, either.

All the students were settled, flipping their cards open or closed in various stages of despair or relief. Sister sat forward, clasping her hands.

“Let me say that I was not satisfied with the grades this year,” she said. “Some of you, I know, did very well — you know who you are — but even those who did could have done better. There’s always room for improvement. God knows you’ve heard me say that enough times. And some of you could have done much better.”

While she spoke, the consequences of the card on his desk began to seep in like an oil stain slowly becoming visible through layers of fabric.

“In many ways it’s been a good year, but in many ways some of you are letting yourselves down, not realizing your fullest potential. Next year you’ll have Mrs. Duffy and you’ll be in eighth grade. You won’t be able to get by with any more nonsense at that point. You all have great potential — remember this — and should never accept second best. Now keep in touch and have a good vacation.” The class jolted from their seats in a body, ready to bolt free of Our Lady of Peace for another year, but Sister held up her hands, freezing them more or less in their positions. “Wait, wait, wait. Don’t neglect the reading lists you’ve been given, and the Sisters and I hope we see you this summer.” She spoke louder, her voice ringing over the noise and scramble. “If there are any questions about the grades, I’ll be around this afternoon and tomorrow. But I think most of them are pretty straightforward.”

The noise became overpowering, with students whooping and rushing to the doors, and while he felt in no rush he found himself in the middle of the pack, and as he was swept out the door he remembered Sister’s last words being “If your parents have any questions, they can call the convent.”

His mother shrieked at the math grade. The noise startled him. He'd left the report card on the counter as he always did, as if in a daze, as if there were nothing unusual about it. She'd opened it expecting the same thing.

"An F!" she exclaimed. "An F! Oh, my God, he got an F!" There was scuffling in the kitchen, Kristi apparently wanting to see and trying to grab the card from her mother. A pot fell over, cascading dirty dishes into the sink. Stupid ran back and forth, barking ecstatically.

He shut the bathroom door and slumped on the toilet seat. This was even worse than he had expected.

His mother pounded on the door, demanding he come out of there. It swung open violently when he didn't respond.

"Do you hear me?" she said. "What in God's name have you done now?"

He remained where he was, arms at his side. His sister peered cautiously into the bathroom, and the dog calmed somewhat, trotting from kitchen to hallway.

His mother stood before him, the card wagging in her hand. She did not, they both realized, know how to deal with this.

"Well?" she said. His response to all of this plainly disconcerted her and was beginning to frighten her as well. Her anger dissipated but the F remained in her hand, and she looked back and forth in the tiny space, frustrated, as though something in the room might help. Finally she turned, Kristi and Stupid moving quickly out of her way, and stalked into the kitchen.

"It's as though he did it on purpose," she said, half to herself, as she opened the dishwasher. Spoons clattered and dishes clanked against each other. "You heard your father's threat about taking you out of Our Lady of Peace. What am I supposed to tell him now? And you didn't just go down a notch. No, sir. Not our Biddy. You dropped through the floor. An F. Your father's going to go into shock."

He pushed by Kristi and went upstairs and sat on the bed, staring stupidly at the floor. Then he revived, crossing to the desk and pulling a folded Hefty trash-can liner out of the top drawer, his movements beginning to resemble those of well-drilled emergency personnel: mechanical, assured, swift. Things flew into the trash bag. Mr. Carver's manual was swept up, and pages marked and ready were torn from *The Lore of Flight* and stapled together.

He heard his mother at the foot of the stairs, still frustrated: "If I were you, I'd pack my things. I'd hate to be in your shoes when your father gets home."

He had planned on writing notes, and in fact began the first one,

to Cindy, maintaining as best he could the fine line between speed and legibility, but he stopped, unable to communicate what he wanted to say in any adequate way, and, feeling time rush away from him like a spent wave on a beach, he thrust the paper aside. He had a list of people assembled: Cindy, Laura, Teddy, Simon, Louis, Kristi, Ronnie, and his parents, and he finally simply circled each name on the list, a single circle joining his parents' names, as if that would communicate enough, or would have to do. With the list now a column of stacked ovals, he cleared his desk top of all other clutter so that it might be left centered and alone under the window.

He left while his mother was in the den. His bicycle was piled along the wall in the garage behind some fencing and the lawn mower, and he pulled it out, new cobwebs drifting across his arms. He'd checked the bike three days before and had found that, beyond some grinding and rattling noises, everything worked as well as ever. He'd stopped using it more than a year ago because it was too small, a child's bike with its long handlebars and banana seat, embarrassing in a neighborhood of statuesque racing frames, but now it was invaluable because of that very lack of size. He swung onto the seat and pushed off, pedaling out of the gloom into the sunlight, and stopped to pick up the Hefty bag he'd left near the door.

Kristi appeared at the screen. "What are you doing?" she asked.

He flinched, determined to look nonchalant. "Taking some stuff over Teddy's." She watched him tie the bag securely to the handle on the back of the banana seat, positioning it on top so that it would rest behind him.

"Biddy's running away, Mom," she announced.

He remained motionless.

"I would too if I were him," his mother said from the other room.

He kept his eyes on Kristi, meeting her even gaze.

"Where you gonna go?" she said.

He gave his head a perceptible shake. "Don't say anything." His sister was a shadow on the sunlit screen, impossible to interpret. "Okay?"

"Okay," she said.

"Take care." He pressed his hand to the screen.

"You too," she said.

He surged forward on the pedals, building speed quickly down the driveway and out into the street. Sikorsky was four miles away. He had measured it. He had ridden it the previous week. He turned left onto Prospect Drive, and again, onto Stratford Road, grateful for the shade trees lining its edge. It was still very sunny, with patches of thick white clouds, and already sweat tickled his breastbone under his

shirt. In the bag behind him on the banana seat, he carried extra pairs of underwear, shorts, and sneakers, a pair of jeans, an extra shirt, a lightweight poncho, his mess kit, tent, flashlight, compass, the pages from *The Lore of Flight,* the Cessna manual, and thirty-seven dollars in savings. He was going to steal Mr. Carver's Cessna 152 and fly it to East Hampton, Long Island.

He followed Stratford Road in a great lazy curve to the north around runway 29 and flew along the straightaway between Avco and the fenced-in hangars and planes on his left. Avco's outbuildings and parking lots stretched for blocks as an irregular series of flat ugly buildings and pavement, which finally gave way to the shade of the heavy oaks and hemlocks of Ferry Boulevard, the air cooling him as it rushed past. He swooped by the entrance to the Shakespeare Theatre no longer noting landmarks, maintaining his speed despite the pressure that fatigue was building on his thigh muscles; he was on the final leg, Route 110, before he finally realized it. The road was a narrow blacktop twisting along the Housatonic, with the river on one side and a state park, a green hedge of young trees and aggressive understory, on the other. As he swept around curves he caught glimpses of the arched Merritt Parkway bridge spanning the river, cluttered and glittering in the sun, with Sikorsky Aircraft, A Division of United Technologies, right behind it.

At the outer guardhouse, a security officer was gazing into the middle distance and seemed not to see or care that he went by. He cruised down the long ramp to the visitors' parking area, finally resting, his feet light on the pedals. At the front doors he got off, took a breath, let down his kickstand, and went inside, soaked with sweat.

A uniformed guard waited opposite the door at a desk. He smiled. "Well. Just swim over?" he said.

Biddy swallowed, trying to subdue his panting and chilled by the air conditioner. "I'm Biddy Siebert," he said. "Mr. Siebert's son. Could I see my father a minute?"

The guard made a mock serious face. "I think we could arrange that," he said. He punched three buttons on the phone before him. "Who's this? Shirley?" he said suddenly. "Shirley, is Walt Siebert in? Where is he?"

He was at lunch, Biddy knew. He ate lunch early, almost always in the cafeteria.

The guard hung up. "Out of luck, guy. She says he's at lunch."

"I think I know where he might be," Biddy said. "I could go get him."

"I can't let you wander around alone, sport. You're welcome to wait, though. If it's an emergency maybe we can page him."

Biddy assured him it was no emergency.

“Well, here, I can give you your security badge while you’re waiting.” He held out a yellow-and-white plastic card, with a clip on the end of it, that read GUEST — SIKORSKY AIRCRAFT. Biddy hung it from the neck of his T-shirt.

“And you can fill out this visitor’s card, too.”

He filled in the information hurriedly. Under “Reason for Visit” he wrote “Social,” and sat back in the chair, fidgeting, while the guard returned to the skimpy paperwork in front of him. The lobby was very plain: a few chairs, a table with some worn magazines, a plant in the corner. Spaced along the room evenly were framed 8″ x 10″ photographs of Sikorsky helicopters in action, carrying logs over fir forests, recovering astronauts, ferrying infantry and jeeps. In one a man remarkably like his father stepped from a smallish corporate S-76 with elegant red and black stripes running its length.

Biddy tapped his foot and wiped his head with his hands. Every so often men in short-sleeved shirts with jackets over their arms came by in groups of twos or threes, laughing and heading to lunch. He stood and wandered to the interior door to the plant.

“Oh, there he is,” he said, and opened it. “I see him,” and he glanced back and saw the guard’s startled face before slipping through. He turned an immediate corner, rushed up the stairs lightly on the balls of his feet to keep the noise down, and followed the hallway to Marketing, opening the door to find himself face to face with a woman, blonde and pretty, her hair pulled away from her face.

“What’re you looking for, honey?” she said. “Lose your way?”

“No, my father’s right over here,” he said, maneuvering past and gesturing down the corridor vaguely. He didn’t look back. The rooms to his left were all part of one great room, which had been divided into smaller units by high beige partitions, and he passed offices on his right, his eyes skimming the nameplates on the doors. He turned in to the fifth office and knocked as he entered.

“Mr. Carver?” he said.

Carver glanced up from his desk, surprised. “Biddy. How are you. What’s up?”

“Nothing much,” he said, trying not to rush. “Just visiting my father.” He held his breath. “He asked me to ask you if he could borrow your keys to the IFA file. He can’t find his or something.”

“What the hell is the IFA file?” he said. “I don’t know what he’s talking about.”

Biddy hesitated. “I don’t know either, but he said you had them. He said they were the same key as something else.”

Carver made a disgusted noise, pulled out his key ring, and began to search through it. Biddy froze.

“Here, take the whole thing,” he said. “I don’t know what he’s

talking about. So much stuff comes and goes around here — And tell your father not to hang on to them all day. I'm going to lunch soon and my car keys are on there."

Biddy thanked him and backed swiftly out the door, mentioning as well that it was nice to see him again, and swept back down the corridor and through the Marketing door, fearing the return of the blonde woman. He rounded a corner and ran head on into his father.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he said. "Something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong." Biddy smiled as though he'd just stepped in manure. "I just came to visit."

"You just came to visit?"

"I rode over to Roosevelt Forest. I was right nearby."

His father took his arm. "Well, wait. Where are you going now?"

"I'm gonna go back, I guess."

"Well, what happened to your visit? How'd you get in here, anyway? Where'd you get the tag?"

He leaned against the staircase railing. He knew he couldn't rush now, but he also knew Carver wouldn't stay in his office forever. "The guard gave it to me. And I thought I saw you, so I came to look."

"And now you're going."

"I have to. I left Teddy in the forest."

"Nice visit."

"Bye."

But his father said he'd come down with him. At the lobby the guard looked visibly relieved. "Jesus, son, don't do that to me again," he said.

"I won't," Biddy said. "Sorry."

His father held the outside door for him. "Okay, good luck. What's all that shit on the bike?"

Biddy put a hand over it. "Gloves and stuff. We may throw the ball around." He got on the bike and started to pedal away.

"Whoa, whoa," his father said. Biddy stopped and looked back over his shoulder, fighting the urge to make a break for it.

"You get your report card today?"

He nodded.

"Was it up to your expectations?"

He nodded again.

"All right," his father said. "We'll see it when I get home. Go ahead, I won't keep you."

Biddy was off like a shot, cresting the hill onto Route 110 with an excess of momentum and bearing down and pedaling with rhythmic fury back the way he'd come.

His idea had been buttressed month after month with information

from *The Lore of Flight,* the Cessna manual, from the public library, from conversations with Carver, from hours spent hanging around the airport, and from the Rand McNally road map of Long Island. The working out of its details and problems had completely taken the place and function of dice baseball, growing in intensity as it became less and less of a game, as his other alternatives fell away and lost their power or potential. Whether it was cause or effect of the death of his Oriole and Viking visions, he didn't know. He had watched Mr. Carver take off. He had discussed the process with him. He had absorbed the manual. He had never successfully driven a car before, but was convinced he could fly the plane. He could take off, he could maintain level flight, and he was willing to bet — although it was the chanciest part by far — that he could land as well. The Cessna 152 was, as both *The Lore of Flight* and the Cessna manual had assured him, an exceedingly simple aircraft, a trainer of sorts, a beginner's machine. He'd gone over and over the procedures in his head night after night, imagining and remembering the plane's responses, the pictures in his head allowing flights from his desk chair. He'd taken all questions to Mr. Carver or the library and had been satisfied with the answers.

The weather was ideal and he'd be flying VFR, navigating visually, so his radio contact with the tower would be minimal and voice identification impossible. He could bluff his way onto the runway with only the few phrases Carver had used. His bike with the front wheel turned around would fit in the front passenger's seat. According to the specifications in the Cessna manual, there was room. He'd checked his bike with a tape measure.

He was already on Ferry Boulevard, sweeping from shadow to sun to shadow as he flew past the widely spaced trees. He wasn't sure how much time he had or when the alarm would be sounded. And he wasn't sure — he forced the thought from his mind as he pedaled, ducking and leaning forward and pumping furiously — if he could even go through with it, sitting in the cockpit with the engine roaring and the runway stretching flat and terrifying before him.

He would fly to East Hampton. If all went as expected, there would be no notice taken of his flight until too late, nothing considered unusual. Once in the air he would simply cross the Sound and Long Island and bear east along its southern coast. If he appeared from the south, with the wind the usual prevailing westerly, they would tell him to land on runway 28, at the end of which was the dirt path to the road he had glimpsed on his earlier trip. Rand McNally had identified it as Wainscott Road, which after 1.3 miles turned into the East Hampton Turnpike, which passed through Sag Harbor going north 3.3 miles later. He would set the plane down, run the entire

length of tarmac to the tree line, engage the parking brake, leave the engine running, and disembark with his bike on the side away from the Hamptons' service building. There was no tower there and he would not be visible behind the fuselage. He'd take the bike and bag and leave the plane where it was, unharmed, a decoy, a ghost ship. He'd ride to Sag Harbor and then North Haven, take the ferry to Shelter Island, ride to the docks along Ram Island Drive, wait until dark, and take one of the rowboats he had seen so casually tethered to Long Beach Point across less than a mile of bay. At night it would be north-northwest on the compass. It was over a mile long and would be hard to miss. He's never rowed a boat before for any distance; but, then, he'd never flown a plane before, either, he'd reasoned when that part of the plan had been taking shape. From there he'd go to Plum Island, northeast, and from there if possible due east across another mile or so of Sound — lonely, wild water — to Great Gull Island, devoid of any civilizing symbols and marks on the Rand McNally map and distant and alone out beyond the jaws of eastern Long Island's north and south peninsulas.

Avco slipped by hardly noticed, as did the airport fence, sunlight beading along its links in rapid succession, and just past stacks of steel drums and an Army trainer he turned onto the access road, bumping over the patched and broken concrete. The small brick Bridgeport Flight Service sat at the terminus of the dead end, and halfway down was the melancholy Windsock Restaurant, its windows broken, seemingly abandoned. He swung a sharp right opposite it through the opening in the interior fence to the hangar area. He slowed as the space opened in front of him.

Planes of all shapes and colors stood tethered and silent before him, set at random angles in a wide arc. From their wing struts and tails, ropes stretched to metal bars sunk in concrete. He eased to a halt straddling the bike, sweat running into the corners of his eyes. There was no sound, no movement. At this time of day he knew there might be only two or three men in the area, and they would almost certainly be seeking refuge in the manager's air-conditioned office. He slipped the key ring from his pocket and located the Cessna keys, the firm's name embossed in raised letters on the bow of the key. Then he untied the bag and pulled out the manual and checklist, no bigger together than the monthly missalette at church, retied the bag, and pedaled silently through the grove of struts and wings, quickly weaving his way to the blue-and-white Cessna parked with its tail to him and its nose to the runway. He glided up to its fuselage as if on rails, and was off the bike and fitting the key to the passenger door in seconds.

The handlebars caught and grabbed on the metal skin of the fuselage, balking at the smallish cavity of the door, but he angled

them around, hefting the bicycle frame waist-high. The delay was agonizing. Finally it slid in and lay reasonably stable, and he shut the door and moved quickly to the tail. He had the preflight checklist memorized so completely he could visualize the pages in his head. He had them visualized so well — he knew them so well — that he could take shortcuts, save time. He unhooked the rudder gust lock, a metal band around the tail resembling a giant bobby pin, by impatiently spinning the wing nut off that held it together, and set it on the pavement behind him. He disconnected the tail tie-down, unlooping the knots, his fingers fumbling next to the smooth aluminum underside of the tail. He checked the control surfaces for freedom of movement and disconnected the wing tie-downs, flipping the freed ropes from the struts. He gave the tires a shove and hurriedly rolled a nearby stepladder up to the wings to check the fuel quantity visually, then rolled it away. He pulled the canvas cover from the Pitot tube: with the cover on, there would be no ram air input, and with no ram air input, his airspeed indicator and altimeter would not function. The cover still in his hand, he unlocked the other door and clambered aboard, flooded with relief to be finally off the tarmac, but still moving quickly, his hands shaking, pulling out the manual and double-checking the exterior checklist. He'd skipped some checks — oil, landing lights, air filter — gambling somewhat but feeling as though he were pressing his luck to the limit with every moment he stayed outside the plane. From his seat the instrument panel spread before him precisely as expected, the flight controls stabbing upward in a pair of elegant bull's horns. It was a three-dimensional model of the manual's full-page black-and-white photograph. That's all, he told himself. Yet he still shook, and his hand jittered across the plastic surface of the flight control when he reached out to touch it, his sweat leaving a momentary mist of a trail.

Keep moving, he thought. Keep moving, keep moving, keep moving, or you'll never do it. His hands flew.

1. A. Remove control wheel lock.

B. Check ignition switch OFF.

C. Turn on master switch and check fuel quantity indicator; turn master off.

D. Fuel selector valve on BOTH.

E. Check door security; lock with key if children are to occupy any seats.

He gazed through the windshield, the sun glaring it in streaks. It all seemed too easy. He fought the terrifying feeling that he had forgotten or bungled a single fatal detail. He folded the manual open to page 1–4 and propped it up on the seat beside him.

STARTING THE ENGINE

1. Mixture — rich.

2. Carburetor heat — cold.

3. Primer — two to six strokes as required.

The mixture knob was at the right center of the console, a white plastic knob a bit bigger than a thimble. He turned the indicator to "Rich." The carburetor heat control was its symmetric twin. The primer was on the lower left of the panel just above his left knee. He slipped two fingers behind it and pulled, half expecting it not to give. It did. He pumped it in and out twice more, priming the engine with fuel.

4. Throttle — Open 1/8″.

It was right where his diagram had placed it. He crept it out an eighth of an inch.

5. Master switch on.

6. Propeller area — Clear.

It had better be, he thought, not even looking up.

He swallowed. Outside the windshield the runway stretched silent under the sun, oblivious. He felt cold. He threaded the brother of the door key into the ignition — number 7 on the checklist — and turned it firmly, and the engine caught, coughing, terrifying him, the noise an explosion in a church, and gained power and volume with a steady surge. Events seemed to accelerate and he wanted to get off the runway and into the air as soon as possible, fearing last-minute police cars or security guards, remembering his sail collapsing in the storm so many months ago, unable completely to believe that he wasn't overlooking something, some fundamental, foolish detail. Stay with the checklist, he told himself. Move fast. Don't fool around. Shit or get off the pot.

TAXIING

When taxiing, it is important that speed and use of brakes be held to a minimum and that all controls be utilized (see Taxiing diagram, figure 2–4) to maintain directional control and balance.

The wind sock fluttered orange and fragile in the distance, indicating the wind direction and his next move, as outlined by figure 2–4: right-wing aileron slightly up, elevator neutral. He eased his toe off the brake, the arches of his feet still firm in the rudder stirrups, and opened the throttle. The plane began to roll.

He experienced at first that moment of sheer terror when he felt completely inadequate to the task of controlling the vibrating, deafening machine he was setting into motion, but it responded, he began to see, to the gentlest deflections of the flight controls. He wobbled steadily forward, jerking a bit from too much brake, learning by trial and error as he rumbled along how to guide the twelve-hundred-pound plane smoothly. He braked at the turn onto the access

road that fed the runway.

The tower stood squat and imperturbable in the distance, an occasional bird crossing behind it. He switched on the receiver, lifted the microphone from its hook, closed his eyes, and pressed the button. He'd already be on the tower frequency.

"Tower, this is 9–0 Zulu," he said. "Request clearance for taxi."

He released the button and the cockpit filled with static; He waited and there was no answer. His ears were hot and his fingers slippery on the black plastic.

"Roger, Zulu," crackled a voice. "Take off runway 24."

He rehung the microphone and wiped his forehead. There was no alarm, no sudden activity, no yellow jeep. The sun beat down on the pavement. A Funny Bones wrapper, identifiable at forty feet, blew across the tarmac.

He turned left, following the painted yellow lines; the sun slipped behind him, and the shadows of his wings crossed the pavement before the plane like cool ripples. Runway 24 was the closest to him, the longest, and stretched to the south, which meant he'd take off over the marshes and Burma Road and be above the Sound in seconds. He rolled cautiously to the very end of the runway, the white "2" and "4" sweeping away from him majestically, and set the parking brake. His finger skimmed the checklist columns of the manual. He checked the flight controls, the fuel-selector valve, elevator trim, suction gauge, magnetos, and carburetor heat. He ran the engine up to 1700 rpm and past it, up to full throttle, or as near as he dared go—2100 rpm — and back down. He rechecked the locks on the doors. He buckled his seat belt. He was ready to go.

"Tower, this is 9–0 Zulu asking takeoff clearance," he said, the microphone brushing his lips. His gums felt dry.

Roger Zulu, 24 cleared for takeoff." The answer was prompt, listless: just another day at the airport.

He released the parking brake and edged onto the runway, pivoting to his right before braking to a halt with the tarmac vast and endless before him, rushing straight-edged off to a single point over his cowling. He nudged the wing-flap switch until the indicator read 10 degrees up. His feet firm on the brakes, he opened the throttle fully.

The takeoff is a simple procedure: lining the aircraft into the wind, the pilot gives full throttle and releases the wheel brakes. As the aircraft accelerates, airflow over the wings begins to generate lift. When the lift nearly equals the weight, the pilot eases back the control column.

With his toe off the brake, yet hovering near, he felt the surge and

rush of the Cessna down the tarmac even as the flat repetition of images in his peripheral vision seemed to indicate little or no movement, and he remembered to keep the nose of the plane on the horizon as it bumped and shook over the cowling, and he stayed straight on, keeping the centerline centered in front of him, the pavement blurring by, and he felt the wings trying to leave the ground and he was up, prematurely, having waited too long on the control column, and he bounced, hard, frightening himself, but continued to sweep forward and this time pulled the control surface back smoothly and firmly, having the impression from the corner of his eye of the tower and parking lot to his right as colored streaks, and the plane swept off the ground, the left wing dipping a bit with runway to spare, the marshes appearing below, when he dared to look to his left, as yellow and soft as a wheat field with the black shadow of the plane speeding across them. He whooped and cheered, pounding the dashboard, his laughter mixing with the noise of the engine.

He flashed low across the wetlands, the clouds above and land below recalling to him a fleeting memory of the thermocline corridor at the beach, and he continued to climb as he passed over the strip of sand and road that was Long Beach, noting a running child, the dot of a beach ball, a cyclist at rest with one foot on the ground. Then the beach was behind him and the Sound ahead, blue and choppy. The triangular rainbow of a catamaran sail slipped by. And ever more to his left, away from him, was Port Jefferson, his first navigational objective.

In flight the pilot will also want to turn. This is not accomplished by merely turning the rudder as is the case with a ship, but by a combination of aileron, rudder, and elevator movement and an adjustment of engine power.

Trying to remember everything at once and apprehensive, he turned the flight controls, pulling them back slightly as he did and easing out the throttle. The horizon reeled slowly in front of him, the twin stacks of the heavy industry in Port Jefferson harbor centering themselves over his cowling, and he applied opposite rudder and leveled out, elated. He was flying, two thousand feet off the ground without the benefit of a lesson.

Small boats appeared and disappeared below, flecked across the dark water. He allowed himself only the briefest glimpses, concentrating on the altimeter. In minutes he seemed to be coming up on the harbor at Port Jefferson, a small spit of land rising from his left to a steep bluff. Hundreds of boats were sheltered in its lee like orderly flotsam. There was a long knife edge of breakwater and then the darker blue of the channel and a freighter of some sort, maroon

and black with its rust visible even from his height. He passed over the town as it climbed the hills from the harbor as if in an attempt to meet him, and he began to have the vague impression of trees and roads below, his eyes fixed on the compass and altimeter. The engine roared reassuringly and he made constant minute adjustments, concentrating. The cockpit hung pendulum-like beneath the great wings and the sun swept in the canopy and glittered on the fuselage. Ahead of him, rising like a sheer wall to an awesome height, was a snow-white anvil-shaped cloud filling his field of vision as he hurtled into it, having kept his eyes too long on the instruments. The sun disappeared and he was in a world of gray, all sensation of movement gone and the engine racketing abstractly in the half gloom. He fought panic and kept his eyes on the altimeter as it dipped and rose, thinking, Maybe it will stop, it's got to stop somewhere, and as it continued his fear mounted and he was no longer sure of his compass headings. He had to try something else and he had to trust his memory and ability.

EMERGENCY PROCEDURES: Disorientation in Clouds.

Executing a 180˚ turn in clouds.

Upon entering the clouds an immediate plan should be made to turn back as follows:

He located the clock and put his finger physically on the glass over the minute hand, trying to calm himself. When the sweep second hand indicated the nearest half minute, he banked to the left, holding the turn coordinator — a small white symbolic airplane wing on a black field — opposite the lower left index mark, waiting, waiting, for the second hand to complete its revolution. When it did, he leveled off, checking the compass heading to insure it was the opposite of the previous one and climbing to restore altitude. He could hear himself breathing, panting like a dog. Outside the cockpit everything was still softly opaque. He fought the urge to dive or climb. The gray remained, fog or wool, and his fear grew and he was ready to call on God when the gray swept away and sunlight flooded him, glancing blindingly off the cowling. He whooped even as he blinked and averted his eyes.

After a few moments he swung the plane around to the left again, returning to the cloud but letting the altimeter slip until it read 2000 and he was passing underneath the flat white ceiling, the light losing some of its warmth, bumps and irregularities appearing on the underside and rushing past. He passed a highway, ribboned with moving cars. A shopping center like an arrangement of low boxes. Clusters of towns. More highways. He found himself out from under the cloud, in the sun again, with the shore and the Atlantic uneven strips on the horizon. Towns, trees, roads, fields. Farmland. Low

fences with animals (cows?) spotting the land. A bridge across a narrow bay. Marshes and beach houses. The white lines of sand and breakers and he was back over ocean again, banking up and around with blue sky and white clouds spinning across the windshield. When he leveled out, the compass on the dash was reading E-NE and he was following the long thin strip of land to his left between a large bay and the Atlantic, the land a joyous tan in the sun and a directional indicator to East Hampton Airport.

He seemed to be safely south of the clouds and flew level, free and happy. He laughed aloud again in delight, bobbing his wings a bit to echo his feelings.

The radio crackled, harsh and startling. “Aircraft 9–0 Zulu, are you on frequency?”

He stared silently out the window, everything falling apart in front of him.

“Aircraft 9–0 Zulu repeat are you on frequency?”

The tone recalled Sister Theresa seeing him on the roof, his father hearing of the detention. Broken windows, ruined dress pants, late arrivals, and poor report cards. They knew the plane was missing, they knew he had it and they knew it was still in the air.

He sat immobilized by the shock of his failure. It had been crucial that he land undetected, to allow for his unnoticed disappearance on the bicycle, but he couldn’t land undetected anywhere now with the designation he was sporting on the side of his fuselage. His plan had been destroyed, that quickly, that easily. He wiped his eyes furiously. He had to think. It couldn’t be all over after everything he’d been through. Below him breakers ran a jagged white track along the shore, curving and growing in distant foamy lines. He was passing a very large airport to his left, and the land below opened into a great irregular bay closed to the sea by a long spit crested with dunes. If it was Shinnecock Bay, as he guessed it was from the map, Southampton was directly east, and he would be approaching East Hampton Airport in minutes.

He couldn’t land there, he thought. He couldn’t just quit. But where else could he go? What other airport could he find from the air without navigational aids? Montauk had an airport, he knew, but that was as good as giving up: they’d be waiting there as well, and it was exposed and isolated, with nowhere to go once he landed.

“Biddy. Biddy, this is your father. What the good Christ do you think you’re doing?”

He stared at the radio, stunned. The engine’s roar changed in pitch to signal he’d let the nose drop, and he corrected it.

“Biddy, tell us where you are.” His father sounded as though the lifeboats were sinking or he was hanging from a cliff. On the radar

screen his blip would be indistinguishable from any others. “Biddy, you got up all right but how are you going to get down? Biddy! Let them talk you down!” His father’s last cry shook him, and he reached for the microphone. The crackling continued.

“Aircraft 9–0 Zulu, are you on frequency? Aircraft 9–0 Zulu, are you on frequency? Acknowledge.”

The coast was flowing steadily under the cowling as the Cessna’s nose ate up space and distance. There was literally nowhere to go. He began to cry, from frustration and tension. I could go right to Great Gull Island, he thought. I could go right to it and land in the water.

But he recognized the absurdity of the idea: he’d destroy the plane, kill himself. Or hurt himself and drown. And how could that possibly go undetected?

The voice on the radio asked again if he was on frequency. His father’s voice broke in. “Biddy,” he said. “Please.”

The blue sky hung unbroken before him. The extent to which he’d hurt people had been reflected in his father’s final cry, and it had been much more than he had guessed. Every action he was taking was connected to others and hurting in ever-widening circles and ways and there was no longer any hope of preserving the illusion of his actions enjoying a total independence in the world, of his escape taking place in a vacuum. Was any of this going to make him, or anyone else, or anything about his life; any better?

East Hampton Airport rolled into sight over the drum of the horizon. He lifted the microphone and pushed the “Send” button. “I’m all right,” he said. “I’ll be right down.” He lowered it to his lap at the answering gabble of voices and shut off the receiver. He turned the frequency to 132.25 for East Hampton. He glanced into the distance in the northeast, trying for a glimpse, at least a glimpse, after having come this far, of the north fork and Plum or Great Gull Island in the haze. But it all remained indistinct and imprecise, however beautiful. He switched the receiver back on and raised the microphone.

“East Hampton, this is 9–0 Zulu,” he said. His back hurt and his head ached. “What’s your active runway?”

“Ah, Roger, Zulu, we have traffic taking off and coming in on 28.” There was a pause. “Ah, 9–0 Zulu, do you want to be talked down? Acknowledge.”

He pressed to answer, the radio silence hissing expectantly. “No,” he said. “No, thank you.” He switched off the receiver.

He was approaching from the southeast. There were no clouds over the airport, and no traffic he could make out. A far-off V of birds stroked across the sky toward the land.

Below him houses and gray roads rolled by, breaking the irregular green of the trees: he was away from the coast. The airport grew

larger, the three runways a gray triangle pointed at him, the service area as vivid against the dark green pines as he remembered. Far below he could make out tiny multicolored ovals drifting up toward him — balloons, he realized with a start, their threadlike strings undulating behind. The sun caught on a random car windshield, sparkling like a diamond.

He pushed left rudder hard and went into a bank, thrusting the control column forward and the nose down as he did. The sky went over the top of the canopy and the ground centered itself on the windshield and began to climb slowly to meet him. The altimeter was dropping, the needle retreating from 3 past four calibrated notches to 2 and still descending when he checked the airspeed indicator, just leaving the green arc of normal operating range at 130 mph and making its way through the yellow, labeled CAUTION. He eased back on the throttle, keeping the indicator away from the red line, and the triangle of runway shook gently and grew in size in his windshield, tilting from the level as his wings did, and when he felt he couldn't go any lower he began to pull up, the ground rushing along under him like a film out of control, vague shapes and colors streaking by, blurring and disappearing in an instant. Tree after tree swept past and roads and a hill and the airport suddenly loomed in front of him from out of the trees like someone rising from tall grass, the central buildings rushing at him, and he was too low too low the wheels his belly would hit surely and he was over, skimming the billowing carpet of treetops again, the altimeter creeping higher as he pulled up and around.

Climbing, he turned on the receiver. There was a loud burst of static. "Uh, 9–0 Zulu, have you lost your mind? Acknowledge."

His climb and bank were carrying his nose around to the sun, which flooded white and blinding across the canopy. He leveled out east of the airport, the plane sideslipping a bit as he did, and came around again, on line with the runway. He eased the nose up and the throttle forward and his airspeed began to drop.

He lifted the microphone from his lap. "This is 9–0 Zulu. Can I have landing clearance?" he said.

A voice crackled back. "Jesus Christ, by all means, Zulu."

He was already on his approach. He extended his flaps. A utility right-of-way flashed by beneath him, the power lines and treetops closer than he expected.

"Watch your airspeed, Zulu," the radio said. Things seemed to slow. Trees drifted by. The curve of a road. A field with a white dog outlined against tall weeds.

"Keep your nose up, Zulu. Keep it on the horizon. Stay level. Watch your airspeed." He did. It read 90. Everything was spinning by

him. He was so low he saw only trees and then they stopped and it was flat and wide before him, gray streaked with black, and the white number 28 glided up to meet him and he could hear the radio as if it were in someone else's cockpit—"Ease back! Ease back!"—and, keeping the top of his cowling in line with the horizon, easing the nose still farther back, cutting the power still more, he caught one last glimpse of the airspeed indicator, vaguely remembering it as too high, before he hit.

He bounced, jerking forward and upward in the seat as if catapulted, his shoulder harness straining against him, the wings outside the cockpit swaying against the level ground flashing past. And he lifted the nose still more and cut the throttle almost to nothing, and the plane seemed to hesitate in the air before dropping again, like a sofa, to the runway, the concussion nearly shaking his hands from the wheel but leaving him on the tarmac, rolling instead of flying, with quite a distance of safety margin still to go. He rolled and rolled and began to slow and his toes found the brakes again, a little too soon, but again, learning quickly, and he taxied to the very edge of the runway and bumped off onto the access area, turning until trees and trunks filled his vision and the plane rolled to a stop. He reached forward to switch the engine off and the propellers began to materialize, blurs cutting a half circle in front of him before hacking and chopping to a halt, gleaming and smooth. He wasn't used to the silence, and small noises seemed out of proportion, welcome.

Across the long bisection of runways to his right he could make out a lone police car, a bar of red-and-blue lights on its roof, approaching on the access road from the parking area, its tires audible on the gravel. There had been no foam on the runway, no battery of rescue vehicles, no SWAT team. And no crash. There was just a lone police car, in no discernible hurry. As it grew closer, he unbuckled his harness, anxious to get the bike and the bag out of the cargo area himself. He wanted no help at this point. He'd come this far, he had a way to go, and he wanted to be ready by the time they arrived.

About the Author

Jim Shepard (b. 1956) is the author of four short story collections and seven novels, most recently *The Book of Aron*, which has been shortlisted for both the Kirkus Prize and the American Library Association Andrew Carnegie Medal. Originally from Connecticut, Shepard now lives in Williamstown, Massachusetts. He is the J. Leland Miller Professor of English at Williams College, where he teaches creative writing and film. He won the Story Prize for his collection *Like You'd Understand, Anyway*, which was also a finalist for the National Book Award. Shepard's stories have appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Paris Review*, the *Atlantic Monthly, Harper's Magazine*, and *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, among other publications; five have been selected for the *Best American Short Stories*, two for the *PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories*, and one for a Pushcart Prize.